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A Kantian Reinterpretation: Supernal Beauty in Edgar Poe's *Ligeia*

As one of the most influential tales of grotesque written by Edgar Allan Poe, *Ligeia* reveals a story of a man who is convinced that his first wife returns as a spectre to animate the corpse of his second wife. While supernatural elements and Gothic tropes in Poe's fictions receive ample discussions, few have pointed out the fact that death of a beautiful woman—a poetic subject highly valorized by Poe—is deeply interconnected with eternal beauty in *Ligeia*.

Contrary to the conventional supernatural readings of Lady Ligeia either as a fear-inducing mechanical device—a signifier indicating the ungraspable void in the radical Gothic sublime—or the locus of terror as in the Burkean sublime, this paper will depart from a new perspective in which the psychological aspect of the unreliable narrator is taken into consideration. I aim to demonstrate that *Ligeia* serves as an embodiment of Supernal Beauty, an emblem of spiritual exultation which occupies the ethereal sphere of the Ideal and thus corresponds to both the Kantian sublime and Poe's transcendental metaphysics. Despite the numerous hostile criticism and vehement contentions that consign Poe to a purposeless

“obscurantist” who has a “tendency to rely upon the mechanically startling” (Winters 12) and critics who point out his aesthetic doctrines lack substantial basis or fundamental consistency, I argue that Poe’s conceptualization of transcendental beauty should not be solely interpreted with his critical theory but further substantiated with the explications of his fantastical writings. In this regard, few have attempted to resolve the ostensible paradox between his widely acknowledged commitment to Supernal Beauty as his aesthetic preoccupation and the paralyzing effect produced by the unsettling, demonic elements recurrent in his Gothic tales which estrange one from spiritual exultation.

Often structured as an antithesis to moral didacticism, Poe’s literary works rarely offer any reassuring resolution or religious consolation for his readers. Nevertheless, the protagonists in his fantastical horror stories sometimes succeed in their attempt to reaffirm their belief in a transcendental world beyond human knowledge. Like many Romantic heroes who seek for esoteric knowledge, the narrator of *Ligeia* persistently makes endeavor to validate his theory of the unknown realm of afterlife. As stated in *Ligeia*’s prologue which is attributed to Joseph Glanvill by Poe: “And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will”(111), the baffled human endeavor to fathom the secrets of divine power indicates that God’s omnipresent will is beyond man’s

apprehension. For the narrator, his quest of forbidden knowledge with Ligeia functions as a medium to the transcendental realm. With Ligeia's guidance through "the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation" (115) and her revivification after death, his aspiration for transcendent experience is actualized by sensing in nature superior powers that cannot be achieved through material reality.

In this sense, Ligeia serves not as a passionate lover but a metaphorical portal to the spiritual world—she is arguably nonexistent from the outset, which can be validated by several descriptions provided by the narrator: despite the fact that he fails to recall her origin and their encounter, "her rare learning, her singular yet placid cast of beauty, and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language, [still] made their way into [his] heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive that they have been unnoticed and unknown" (111). The unreality of Ligeia can be further observed in the "incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of her footfall"(112), her apparition-like departure and her face that resembles "the radiance of an opium-dream"(112), which establishes the narrator as an unreliable one and thereby dismisses the oversimplified supernatural interpretation. It is vital that we situate Lady Ligeia not as a sheer supernatural device to evoke astonishment, but an opium-induced hallucination, a surrogate that embodies the narrator's idealization of ethereal beauty.

The narrator's married life with Ligeia can thus be interpreted as a vicarious daydream of a man whose "ideal fulfillment [is] once mystically achieved or fitfully envisioned"

(Gargano 338); thus his actual marriage with Rowena is intrinsically a profanation of his previously idolatry for the sacred Ligeia. Undeniably, the intended Gothic setting of Rowena's bridal chamber connotes the imagery of death—the “pall-like canopy”, the “gigantic sarcophagus of black granite”(119) and the lofty vault altogether evince a premonition of impending doom rather than a blissful matrimony. Contrary to the narrator's self-assertion that Rowena dies of inexplicable illness, the deliberate choice of locale discloses the narrator's predetermined intent to poison his bride and prepare for Ligeia's return. What this actually entails is that both Ligeia and Rowena have to die for him to reestablish an alliance with the Ideal sphere where “the perpetual novelty of beauty arouses . . . continuous wonder and awe”(Gargano 339). In other words, he succeeds in transcending the limitations of moral conditions by conjuring up an eternal sphere of unbounded spiritual beauty.

By engaging such a psychological aspect, one can readily find a much more tenable theoretical stance from Poe's theorization of Supernal Beauty. Frequently identified with the influence of Percy Bysshe Shelley's “A Defence of Poetry”, Poe's aesthetic doctrines underscore the potential of poetry to affect human perceptions and reveal to them the hidden beauty of an external world—that is, poetry “makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world . . . [it] redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man”(Shelley 14-5). Undeniably, Poe agrees with this point of view by stating in his review

of Drake and Halleck that “The sentiment of Poesy . . . is the sense of the beautiful, of the sublime, and of the mystical. . . . [It is the] love and [the] admiration of Heaven and of the Earth, the unconquerable desire-to know. . . . Poesy is the sentiment of Intellectual Happiness here, and the Hope of a higher Intellectual Happiness hereafter. Imagination is its soul”(“The Poetic Principle” 561). Clearly, the Poetic Sentiment—as Poe establishes—requires an identification of ourselves with the beautiful, and imagination can only be stimulated by our exertion of the mental faculties.

His theoretical framework remains consistent in “The Philosophy of Composition” where he claims that men refer to Beauty not in the sense of a quality but as an effect (543). In both explications, the Poetic Sentiment is equivalent to his account of Ideality—namely, the imaginative faculties. It follows that the construct of beauty as an exultation “carries the poet or the fit reader beyond the limitations of the finite, the temporal, and the earthly into a sphere of the infinite, the timeless, and the supernal universe”(Laser 75). To elucidate on this, Poe describes a momentary experience of divine delusion, an instantaneous rapture that originates from highly stimulated imagination and brings forth “a glimpse of things supernal and eternal [that introduces us] to the very verge of the great secrets” (Laser 79)—such is the encounter with Supernal Beauty. According to Poe, Supernal Beauty is “not afforded the soul by any existing collocation of earth’s forms”(“The Poetic Principle” 562); namely, it is a transempirical entity independent of the earthly objects in which it is manifested.

It is under this premise that he defines the poetic principle as “the Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty”(562) and the Poetic Sentiment as the “pleasurable elevation or excitement of the soul” that “is derived . . . from the contemplation of the beautiful” (562). Nevertheless, this transcendental realm only manifests itself in transient and “indeterminate glimpses”(290). In this regard, Poe’s transcendental aesthetics resonate with the Kantian sublime in that they both contend sublimity cannot be contained in sensible forms but only summoned by mental faculties. It follows that for both of them, sublimity lies not in the nature of objects, but rather in subjective perception. The convergence of their aesthetic stance can be validated by Immanuel Kant’s postulation in “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” where he asserts that “[Sublimity] is produced by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger”(98). He further establishes that sublimity emerges when “. . . the mind is induced to abandon sensibility and occupy itself with ideas containing a higher purposiveness”(99), which corresponds to Poe’s conceptions of the momentary exaltation and preoccupation by a superior, eternal beauty. Therefore, it is justifying to say that in Poe’s theorizations, Supernal Beauty and sublimity are two interchangeable terms.

In this sense, the transcendental aesthetics delineated by Poe share more common grounds with the Kantian sublime than the Burkean sublime. While both Poe and Burke agree that obscurity contributes to the evocation of wonder and astonishment as uncertainty is more

affecting to the imagination—thus conducive to sublimity—the latter posits his theoretical framework firmly on an empirical basis. As David Morris argues in “Gothic Sublimity”, “Burke proves deficient for an understanding of the Gothic novel because he rests his theory of terror on a narrow, mechanical account of bodily processes”(301). For instance, Burke seems to oversimplify the complex discrepancies of death and pain as to reduce them to the same mechanism that pertains to self-preservation and thereby arouses in us “an apprehension of pain or death” (Burke 53) only in different degrees. Taking this into consideration, “[t]he Gothic novel stands as an implicit critique of Burke—a testament to how much he and his age were unable to explain about the sublime”(Morris 302).

Whereas mortal death contributes to the Burkean sublime as a remote cause, it is presented as an immediate source of sublime passion in Poe’s aesthetics (Morris 308). As widely acknowledged by literary critics, female death and bereavement is frequently engaged in Poe’s tales to evoke melancholy. One cannot help but associate the intense outpour of sublime feelings and melancholic sentiment upon the discovery that “. . . because the ideal beauty is beyond man’s empirical knowledge yet tantalizingly immanent as a result of his dual nature, its representations evoke melancholy; and because the ideal realm is transcendent and indefinite, its proper representations will evince a certain indefinitiveness”(Kelly 524).

According to Kant, as “our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, . . . our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so our power of estimating the magnitude

of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power . . .”(106). In the light of this association, Kant’s descriptions of the human inadequacy of imagination to represent the absolute magnitude seem to explain the source of Poe’s account of melancholy which is aroused by the awareness of our thwarted aspiration for the union with timeless beauty and the ideal to discover within himself a “perennial existence”—the desire of “the moth for the star”(“Poetic Principle” 561). According to Poe, it is “through a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp . . . those divine and rapturous joys . . . of which through [artistic representations] . . . we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses”(561). This paradox of pleasurable sadness is further elucidated by Joseph J. Moldenhauer who explicates that

Thus the route to unearthly loveliness, to a state of happy freedom from the flawed “things and thoughts of Time,” must lead through those very materials and frustrations which the poet and his reader long to transcend. As an end, poetic beauty is the condition, however transient, of inappetency or rest; the poem “in elevating, tranquilizes the soul”. But as process poetry involves “struggle,” nervous tension, dislocation from the familiar patterns of experience.

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Accordingly, the mystic and ideal Supernal Beauty is intricately bound up with

melancholy and poetical sorrow in Poe's transcendental aesthetics. It is vital to point out that despite some evident contradictions in Poe's literary criticism, the evolving structure of his aesthetic theory eventually grows to illuminate his imaginative writings: The narrator of *Ligeia* struggles to fathom the unknowable design of Universe/Divinity. It is suggested that the esoteric knowledge sought by the narrator concerns the secrets of life and death—by stating that “[m]an doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will”(111), Poe demonstrates that the narrator endeavors to vanquish the inevitable mortality. Taking into consideration his attempt to escape death, it follows that Ligeia must be put to death to verify the validity of Glanvill's statement.

Furthermore, throughout the story Lady Ligeia is presented as an immensely erudite woman who possesses an extraordinary will to live. Naturally, for the narrator, her confrontation with death will serve to validate whether humanity is capable of conquering the mystic design of Divinity and return with forbidden knowledge. One is tempted to go so far as to say that the departure and return of Ligeia is a spiritual journey, the soul's quest for ultimate knowledge which is at once desirable and destructive.

We can now safely assume that Ligeia only exists on the imaginary level, for her ethereal nature confirms the fact that she is a personification of an ideal, exalted being compounded of vagueness, mystery, strange beauty, and wild passion. To be more specific, the narrator experiences moments of “intense excitement” whenever Ligeia is present, and

her appearance evinces the “beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth”(Poe 113).

Here we observe that “Poe’s Romantic conception of the imagination is characteristically melancholy [, for] only through an artistic imaginative power can man, by perceiving some overall design, find any hope of purpose to his existence in the face of nearly overwhelming doubt”(Thompson 298). In conclusion, Poe consolidates his transcendental aesthetics by revising the Kantian sublime and taking it one step further to merge with the Gothic sublime, reconciling the unnerving impression produced by supernatural elements and the elevating effect induced by poetic sentiments.

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