

The Abyss Attraction in Poe, Hitchcock and Neil Gaiman

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When David Punter said that "all writing is 'haunted' by the shapes of all that is not" (1998: 2), he knew that every artist faces this dark abyss and the fear of being haunted by all that was produced in the past. Being an expert in creating haunted atmospheres, Gothic literature can only be haunted by itself, being caught in a perpetual act of creating or recreating past stories and recurring themes.

A metaphor for the creative process, the mystery of man's desire for the unknown, implicated in the extinction of his personality, has always attracted the attention of several artists from different periods of time. This explains many images of the abyss or vertigo in gothic literature. They are used as the most accurate vocabulary to explore the irrational depths of the human soul. Edgar Allan Poe found here the origin of what he called "the terror of the soul" and never stopped fighting the agony of desire that led him to create caves, crypts and catacombs that represent the dark recesses of human mind, kept under control or totally ignored by rational thought. The image of vortex is present in several of his short-stories, being this symbol connected to the loss of conscience and to the mind's descent into dream. Something similar happens in *Vertigo*, by Alfred Hitchcock, and in Neil Gaiman's novels, especially in *Neverwhere*, where the main character seems to be victim of an uncontrollable impulse that forces him to penetrate in London's underground, where he meets a bizarre community of men and animals leaving in a labyrinth of dangers and delights beyond imagining. This sometimes perverse abyss attraction constantly haunts the male characters, whose identity and perception depend on their vertiginous experiences, inscribed in a diagram of the cruel geometry of desire that reveals the true authenticity of human existence.

To express this authenticity, Poe wrote the "Imp of Perversé", a tale where perversity is defined as "a paradoxical something" through whose "promptings we act. For the reason that we should *not*". The narrator gives the example of being near a precipice to illustrate this almost satanic urge, inherent in all men, that leads them to self-destruction:

We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss — we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably

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we remain. By slow degrees our sickness, and dizziness, and horror, become merged in a cloud of unnameable feeling. (Poe 1984: 829)

The narrator also reminds the readers that "with certain minds, under certain conditions, it becomes absolutely irresistible." The story develops through a confession which brings with it the knowledge that the narrator-protagonist is one of these minds, because he felt himself victim of this impulse presenting his own case and experience as a way to give credibility to his tale.

The universal incapacity to resist this negative and fatal attraction seems to pursue and haunt many of the most famous Poe's characters. That's why this American author became so specialized in cultivating several adventurous descents into man's dark-side. His voyages into the abyss as *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, *Ms. Found in a Bottle* and *Descent into the Maelström* can represent some equivalents he found in nature to the inner turmoil suffered by his most complex and dark characters. His intention was always to penetrate in the dark recesses of the human mind, which can be so mysterious and dangerous as the appalling vortices of a huge whirlpool. That's why the nervous agitations of his sailors are so similar to the "terror of the soul" felt by his psychologically disturbed narrators and by his most unforgettable characters such as Roderick Usher. All of them partake the same dizziness that irrationally impels them towards the most horrible experiences to whom they feel attracted but also terribly afraid. They are always possessed by a very unhealthy curiosity that turns them into victims of their own perverse impulses. After looking into the chaotic abyss of a whirlpool, in *A Descent into the Maelström*, the narrator confesses:

I have already described the unnatural curiosity which had taken the place of my original terrors. It appeared to grow upon me as I drew nearer and nearer to my dreadful doom. (Poe 1984: 445)

The paradox of this desire to be face to face with the abyss involves also the strong will to surpass it like the effect of that rainbow the narrator saw coming from the bottom of a profound gulf over which it built a bridge that seemed "the only pathway between Time and Eternity." According to this idea, it seems necessary to pass through the terrifying and unutterable experience of knowing a deep abyss, so that one may perceive the existence of an eternity that allows him to transcend death. This explains the duplicity of an impulse that arouses fear of the "universal dissolution" and at the same time creates a desire to dissolve one's personality into that same universal Unity, illustrated by Poe's cosmic theories that also explain the creation of his own fictional universe. A universe so subjected to the laws of creation and destruction as the characters who inhabit it, and who try to extract meaning from the apparent lack of meaning of their absurd existences and contradictory behaviours.

Arthur Gordon Pym is another divided soul created by Poe to express the inability to understand the unintelligible and absurd impulse for the abyss:

And now I was consumed with the irrepressible desire of looking below. I could not, I would not, confine my glances to the cliff; and with a wild, indefinable emotion, half of horror, half of a relieved oppression, I threw my vision far down into the abyss. (...) my whole soul was pervaded with a longing to a fall; a desire, a yearning, a passion utterly uncontrollable. (Poe 1974: 1170).

In *The Pit and the Pendulum*, the narrator tells the reader about his intention to perceive the depth of a dangerous pit by "dislodging a small fragment, and let it fall into the abyss" so that its true dimension could be evaluated through sounds reverberations and loud echoes caused by the descent of a small object. Even in "The Raven", a poem that some critics consider "an orgy of self-destruction", we can be confronted by the presence of an abyss, but of a very special kind, an abyss of melancholy, as it was underlined by Richard Finholt in his essay "The Vision at the Brink of the Abyss". This expression came from Poe's friend, R. H. Horne, in a letter written in May, 1845, where he stated that in this poem "the poet intends to represent a very painful condition of mind, as of an imagination that was liable to topple over into some delirium or an abyss of melancholy, from the continuity of one unvaried emotion." This persistent psychological mood pursues and haunts Roderick Usher and all the narrators, who tell stories about love for dead women, which seem to parallel this characters' impulse towards death and loss of their senses in a vertigo of impossible desires. This explains why stories like *Morella* and *Ligeia* can be compared to *Ms. Found in a Bottle* and *A Descent into the Maelström*, because all of them dramatize the narrators' curiosity for forbidden knowledge that also parallels their attraction for fatal women with whom they experience terrible and exciting dangers.

Consequently, there is an obvious connection between the central subject of Poe's stories and Hitchcock's psychological drama, *Vertigo*. Scottie, the male character played by James Stuart, is also someone who suffers both from acrophobia and from a romantic longing for an idealized blonde who seemed possessed by a dead ancestor, whose mysterious past excites his curiosity making him understand what it feels like to be so near death. The main theme of the film is expressed in a passage that might have come from Poe, because it's inscribed in a heritage of desire and its consequent guilt objectified in Scottie's guilt-feelings after Madeleine's death: "It was will-power he lacked ... He would have had to pour out far more vitality than he possessed to keep her in this world." We should never forget that the name "Madeleine" not only refers to Hitchcock's character played by the unforgettable Kim Novak, but it also refers to Roderick Usher's twin sister, who suffered from catalepsia, recurrently returning from the dead till she died. Poe's influence on Hitchcock was directly assumed by this film director when he stated that:

It's because I was so taken with the Poe stories that I later made suspense films. I don't want to seem immodest, but I can't help comparing what I've tried to put in my films with what Edgar Allan Poe put in his novels: a completely

unbelievable story told to the readers with such a spellbinding logic that you get the impression that the same thing could happen to you tomorrow. (...) But both Poe and I are prisoners of the suspense genre. If I made Cinderella into a movie, everyone would look for a corpse. And if Poe had written *Sleeping Beauty* they'd be looking for a murder. (Spoto 1994: 40).

The famous scene, where Scottie becomes dazed by the vision of his beloved Madeleine coming back from the dead, reminds Poe's readers the image of "the lofty and enshrouded figure" of Madeline Usher, when she came back from her tomb, where her brother had put her still living. In his famous interview to François Truffaut, Hitchcock explained Scottie's morbid attraction to Madeleine saying that: "to put it plainly, the man wants to go to bed with a woman who's dead; he is indulging in a form of necrophilia." (Truffaut 1985: 244).

To find in death a central theme is also at the root of the main idea for *Vertigo* that had its basis in the novel, *D'entre les Morts* (1954) by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac. The title itself contains a certain ambiguity, because it can mean "From Among Dead" or "Between Deaths", which corresponds to the duplicity of the woman character, who is so suspended in the dizzy effect of the vertigo as the male character himself. If the woman's face is like a mask through which we cannot see because of her professional maintenance of an impenetrable appearance, her eyes reveal the abyss that lies at the centre of her character and the impenetrable mystery it contains. Being a source of fear, these eyes are an important symbol from which the film departs showing an opening sequence where vertiginous, undulating and spiralling movements come from the depths of a magnified eye. The visual interest of this moving spiral consists in attracting the viewer attention provoking in himself the same dizzying feeling as the male character will later feel throughout the whole movie, producing the sensation as if one is falling and rising simultaneously, which underlines the essential state of unsettledness associated with vertigo. The spiral symbol, connected to the movements of life and death, is not only present in the woman's eyes but also in her blonde hair, to which Scotty feels himself so dangerously attracted as a sailor possessed by an uncontrollable wish to explore the depths of a whirlpool sweeping round and round the motive of his curiosity, making him feel the same dizzying swings and jerks. This obsessive attraction can be very irrational, but also very human showing the character's own humanity, as Martin Scorsese observed saying that:

Vertigo is also important to me — essential would be more like it — because it has a hero driven purely by obsession. I've always been attracted in my own works to heroes motivated by obsession, and on that level *Vertigo* strikes a deep chord in me every time I see it. Morality, decency, kindness, intelligence, wisdom — all the qualities that we think heroes are supposed to possess — desert Jimmy Stewart's character little by little, until he is left alone as that church tower with the bells tolling behind him and nothing to show but his humanity." (Scorsese 1999: xiii).

This final and shocking image is one of the main reasons why *Vertigo* haunts and affects us so deeply. If the characters are possessed by their dead ancestors and their dead loves, we feel also possessed by their possession, which compels us to perceive their ghostly presence, in other films and stories, and to write essay after essay about them.

Hitchcock's psychological drama is part of our memories as its main theme became part of other fictions, such as *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman, where we can find the same dangerous romantic longing that haunts the male character, who also refuses a superficial and predictable life near his successful girl-friend, and prefers trying an adventurous quest through the dark London Below to help Door to find out who murdered her family. The attraction, that drives the very common businessman, Richard Mayhew, to a very special gifted girl with special powers to open close doors, functions as an attraction of opposites that not only connects a man to a woman, but also unites the normal London Above with the fantastic dark London Below. The curiosity, that drives Scottie to persecute his fatal Madeleine, is the same that impels Richard towards Door, to whom he feels so attracted as to that strange and amazing part of London, where she lives, which also represents an alternate dimension, more interesting and enticing than the boring society he came from. He reaches this world through sewers, subways and mysterious caverns, as if he was falling vertiginously into a terrifying abyss constituted by the disorienting maze of London underground tunnels and hidden passageways. This disorienting experience makes him lose control of the boundaries that separate fact from fiction and sanity from insanity, a very typical situation recurrent in gothic fiction, whenever the limits of certain traditional categories are surpassed to reach high degrees of ambiguity and ambivalence: "Richard had no idea who he was, any more; no idea what was or what was not true; nor whether he was brave or cowardly, mad or sane". (Gaiman 2000: 252). That's why, in *Neverwhere*, the experience of the abyss implies to experience the gap between two different worlds and realities symbolically connected by London subway trains. The so famous warning "Mind the Gap" is something that everybody, travelling in London by Tube, is familiar with, but, in Gaiman's work, "gaps" have very complex meanings. To cross them means to begin a nightmare journey to a fantastical realm at the same time quite familiar and utterly bizarre, where no one is safe. There Richard meets a demonic Angel, intelligent rats speakers, an Earl who holds Court on the carriage of an Underground train, a Beast in a labyrinth and a pair of "ruthless killers who talk like Oxford graduates".

In this sense, to cross the gap means to enter a world of boundless imagination full of dangers and delights that implies a journey to a fantastical realm full of haunting and horrific images expressed through Gaiman's dark humour. Anytime the readers have to use London Underground, they will really never forget to mind the gap and the deep abyss experience it represents, because they will never quite know what might be in it. They will be possessed by this haunting image as London itself is haunted by its own mysterious past, because, as Gaiman stated in an interview, "London is a 2000 year old city, and there is an awful lot of oddness there (...)

there are so many layers of culture, a patina of stuff that's secreted over the years."¹ This is a kind of secret that only a very rich imagination would be able to penetrate, which seems to indicate that the act of creation itself can also be based in a deep interest to know what is beyond the frontiers of common knowledge. The author, himself, seems to be incapable of resisting his impulse to be attracted by this gap, where so many unknown things can be hidden. That's why either Poe, Hitchcock or Gaiman produce works based on a certain destructive impulse to experience the dangers of the abyss, because what interests them most is to go deep into "some exciting knowledge — some never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction." (Poe 1984: 198).

These authors have a common propensity to be attracted by the same irresistible and perverse impulse inherent in all men, but they need these destructive impulses to create their fictions, which hide underneath their stories a complex dark Romantic allegory of the creative process. The paradox of their creations is that they depend on the destructive impulses of their characters, who are very often unable to arrive at any determinate meaning that can explain their irrational actions. This difficulty parallels our futile attempts to uncover the supposed "truth" of the text, which draws our attention to the nature of reading itself. In *Architects of the Abyss*, Dennis Pahl concludes that "reading does not help to expose some hidden depth of meaning but rather covers over with a new layer of language what is already an interpretation — all of which is to imply that there is no bottom, no ground, to the abyss of signification." (1989: 2). This permanent abyss keeps haunting both readers, characters and authors, who fall victims of the same compelling urge to try to "read" into the dark mysteries of the universe.

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¹ <http://www.tabula-rasa.info/AusComics/NeilGaiman.html> (consultado a 25 de Junho de 2010).

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