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Failing again better. *The Fall of the House of – Flanagan’s – Usher* (Netflix, 2023)

Jocelyn Dupont

1. Edgar Allan Poe & the Triumph of Failure

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), American poet, critic, philosopher and of course short story writer, might well have been described by Harold Bloom as “a permanent element of Western culture” and hailed by Vladimir Nabokov as America’s first true national poet, he nevertheless remains associated to the idea of failure, both personal and artistic.

On this account, it must be said from the onset that Rufus Griswold’s deliberate attempt to portray him in a crudely negative light in the immediate aftermath his death as well as the famous daguerreotype taken a few weeks only before Poe’s mysterious and still unexplained decease provided a most adequate material (both in verbal and iconic terms) to draw up the portrait of the failed artist as a not-so-young anymore kind of man¹.

In the mid-1850s, French poet Charles Baudelaire was only too keen to draw inspiration from these early sketches of ill-fame so as to orchestrate his own portrayal of Poe as the paragon of the *poète maudit* in which the author of *Les Fleurs du Mal* was eager to find his own reflection. Baudelaire’s *Notes sur Edgar Poe*, which prefaced his collection of tales by Poe – translated into French into *Histoires extraordinaires* – repeatedly insists on Poe’s personal and biographical disaster, and unequivocally begins under the aegis of failure:

« Il existe des destinées fatales; il existe dans la littérature de chaque pays des hommes qui portent le mot *guignon* écrit en caractères mystérieux dans les plis sinueux de leur front² ».

Ironically, Baudelaire was cunning enough to capitalize on Poe’s own history of failure in order to twist his translations of Poe’s tales into a major literary success, which remain emblematic of the shift from dark romanticism to early psychological modernism, paving the way for subjective investigations of the darker recesses of the human mind, stories of the unconscious still to be baptized.

¹ Poe was only 40 years old when he died.

² Charles Baudelaire, *Notes sur Edgar Poe*

To this day, there are very few cases in the history of literary translation that have exceeded the triumph of Baudelaire's *Histoires Extraordinaires* as exemplary of the 'bi-authorship of translation' and the mutual benefits that each writer (i.e, the original author and the translator) gained from the metamorphosis of Poe's prose into French. It must be observed, however, that Baudelaire's translations of Poe's stories are far from 'spotless'; a close reading of the texts shows a great number of inaccuracies, deviations, inflations, additions and deliberate attempts at reorienting the original to better suit the French poet's intentions³. Yet what might be judged a 'failed' translation from a strictly linguistic perspective turned out to be one of the greatest gateways to literary fame and success, for Baudelaire and most of all for Poe who, thanks to transatlantic literary cross-fertilization in the early years of the 20th century, was able to return posthumously to the English-speaking world like a pendulum in full swing, so to speak.

It is ironical enough that it should have been the work of a translator that made it possible for Poe to return from failure. Indeed, as French translator Claro – who is also an avid reader and scholar of US Literature – observes in his 2024 essay on failure⁴, the activity of the translator is intimately bound to failure, to not write *right*, to fail again and again at coming up with the exact word, phrase or sentence that would give justice to the original work. Translation, Claro observes, is a continuous exercise in failing. Yet from that systematic exercise in repeated failure (*l'iter-rature*, to say it in a Lacanian way) emerges a writing of a new form, of *différance*, which can in itself result in the advent of literature in its own right.

This becomes all the more patent with writers who relish thematically and often biographically on failure such as Poe, Kafka or Pessoa, whose works seize upon the aesthetics and mechanics of failure and might even, in the case of the former, reach all the way to "*l'échec aphrodisiaque, qui permet d'allier chute et jouissance*"⁵. In that respect, the following few lines that Claro writes about the author of *The Castle* could easily be transposed to that of *The Raven*:

Parler d'échec en ce qui concerne Kafka, un écrivain dont l'œuvre aura innervé des pans entiers de la littérature mondiale, peut sembler ridicule. Mais on commence à comprendre, je crois, de quelle sorte d'échec il s'agit. L'échec comme condition de création. Kafka n'écrit pas contre l'échec, mais *avec* l'échec. (84)

³ See Richard and Dupont

⁴ *L'échec. Comment échouer mieux* (Autrement, 2024)

⁵ Claro, 106. One thinks here of course of a tale such as *The Imp of the Perverse* (1845), in which such dizzying enjoyment of failure is achieved.

Before Kafka, there is no doubt that Poe seized that same idea and made failure a condition of creation; there is arguably the key to what DH Lawrence identified as the poet's singular "disintegrative vibration", performed in many of his tales of psychological decay, among which *The Fall of the House of Usher* has pride of place.

2. Poe's *Usher* – the mechanics and performance of failure

First published in *Burton's Gentleman Magazine* in September 1839, "The Fall of the House of Usher" gained some immediate visibility and was collected the following year in *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, Poe's only collection of short stories published in his lifetime. It soon became one of the most visible emblems of Poe's poetics of psychological decay and aesthetics of collapse. One of the mainsprings of the tale is what TS Eliot⁶ would later refer to as the trope of the "objective correlative", apparent in the original story through "an effect which the *physique* of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the *morale* of [Usher's] existence"⁷.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is a paradigmatic tale of failure. Roderick, the dweller of the house, is afflicted by some mysterious malady, an "over-acuteness of the senses" combined with a sense of pervasive melancholy. As the days pass in the company of his friend, who is also the narrator of the tale, Usher descends deeper into his dark reverie, dragging along his sick, beloved sister, his bloodline and ultimately his whole house into decay and destruction. As the house collapses spectacularly with "a long tumultuous shouting like the voice of a thousand waters (...) [into] the deep and dank tarn" (65) that lies before it, Poe's "Usher" becomes what Daniel Hoffman calls rather aptly "a *tale* of the apocalypse of the unconscious, as told by a conscious mind"⁸. The final image, the deliberate "single effect" that the tale strove so hard to achieve, is literally mind-blowing, dramatic and climactic, as well as utterly perplexing.

⁶ Who was also a great connoisseur of Poe and took more seriously than many other poets of his time the influence of the Baltimore writer over future generations of literary artists.

⁷ Poe, 54.

⁸ "The Fall of the House of Usher': An Allegory of the artist" in *Readings on Edgar Allan Poe*, B. Szmuski (ed), Greenhaven Press, 1988. 169-179

In many ways, as the waters of the tarn “close sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘*House of Usher*’”, the reader experiences a sense of irremediable failure. Failure to fathom the nature of Roderick’s ailment, failure to interpret the final deathly embrace between the siblings, failure to interpret the exactness of the narrator’s vision, failure even, to grant the whole story any mimetic capacity beyond its cryptic, symbolic might.

This is what Marc Amfreville suggests when he compares the final apothotic image of the tale to a poetic – and anachronistic – variation on the Freudian primitive scene, with the preclusion of reflection and the possibility of phantasy:

La scène originaire figure, au moment même où elle se visualise comme fantasme, l’irréductible paradoxe de la mimesis : possible mais seulement dans l’élan de sa propre impossibilité. (37)

To the 19th century American Literature scholar Gavin Jones, “The Fall of the House of Usher” is quite possibly Poe’s most remarkable “performances of failure” (18). To Jones, who also links the tale to its national socio-economic context and more particularly the Bank Crisis of 1837 which created a sense of public dread and uncertainty regarding the possibility of failure of the US financial system of the period, “Usher performs the dread of personal failure as reading experience” (23) by his continuous refusal to link cause and effect, a process of self-denial which ultimately drives him to utter failure.

3. Flanagan's post-adaptation: a contemporary exercise in failing again

Adapting the “The Fall of the House of Usher” for the screen is not exactly new business. From the early days of cinema, there have been dozens of filmic transpositions of this iconic tale. Among these, Jean Epstein’s 1928 *La chute de la maison Usher* remains one of the landmarks of avant-garde cinema of the silent period. In 1960, film director Roger Corman (who passed away last May) opened his eight-installment series of Edgar Allan Poe’s works with an adaptation of *House of Usher* (starring Vincent Price as Roderick Usher) inaugurating a specific gothic and colorful aesthetics that was going to be highly influential over future generations of filmmakers, among whom Mike Flanagan.

Other adaptations of the later decades also include experimental short films such as Jan Svankmajer’s 1982 stop-motion film with strictly no human presence nor figure, as well as more curatorial adaptations, such as Raul Garcia’s in his 2015 collection of animation films *Extraordinary Tales*. Alongside, there have been many allusive or indirect adaptations of the tale, such as Guillermo Del Toro’s ambitiously lyrical *Crimson Peak* (2013) and the crudely poetic *The Killer Inside Me* (Winterbottom, 2010) as well as many other houses, not all of which should be visited without prior warning.

In October 2023, that is to say only a few months ago, Mike Flanagan released a mini-series on Netflix which brought back the one of the most famous American haunted Houses to the forefront of media news interest. *The Fall of the House of Usher* is Flanagan’s third and final instalment in his own American “Haunting” venture, in which the showrunner (whose role as screenwriter is pivotal) undertakes to reexplore classic American ghost stories through the creation of anthology mini-series. This makes for a stimulating exercise in postmodern *hauntology* in the days of streaming platform-based entertainment.

In 2018, *The Haunting of Hill House* set the ball rolling, updating and expanding Shirley Jackson’s 1959 novel of the same name, with high rates of critical approval. *Hill House* was rather quickly followed by *The Haunting of Bly Manor* which came out in 2020. The second mini-series explored Henry James’ novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) in a succession of 9 episodes, through update, allusion, cross-adaptation and intermedial resonances. Even though the series often astutely engages with Henry

James' hypotext as well as James Clayton's 1961 movie *The Innocents* as a major filmic intertext, *The Haunting of Bly Manor* failed to convince audiences and critics alike, on account of its excessive sentimentality that drags on painfully during the final episodes of the mini-series. Yet to Flanagan's credit, it must be said that taking up the challenge of transposing James' intricate and ambiguous prose is no easy task, and that he ultimately does rather well in making the House of Bly a new locale of American ghosts, beyond those of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, the original dwellers of the mansion.

Flanagan's *Usher* opts for a rather different take on its hypotext – or rather hypotext-s – than the two previous mini-series. As a matter of fact, instead of following along its 8 episodes the story of Roderick and his anonymous narrator-friend within the many ornamented rooms and Gothic archways of the House of Usher, there are plenty of outings in the series, the modus operandi of which is quite systematic.

The Ushers, to begin with, extend beyond the original doomed siblings. They are a contemporary family of a dozen members, extending way beyond Roderick (Bruce Greenwood) and Madeline (Mary McDonnell), who are here presented as close and cunning business partners rather than an incestuous and melancholy couple. One might easily imagine the eyebrow-raising of the Netflix production executives had they been faced with such option.

Secondly, instead of living in a secluded mansion cut off from the reality of the world as in Poe's original tale, Flanagan's Ushers live in the heart of contemporary Manhattan, and are well-known to the general public as the owners of one of the most powerful pharmaceutical firms in the country. Roderick's former womanizing, who is mostly left in the cupboards of the series, has resulted in a myriad of offsprings, all rather singular and characterized becomingly as diverse and inclusive, in terms of gender and ethnicity. The least one can say about the Usher line is that it perfectly fits the current ideological agenda in which the most transgressive nature of all would consist in being white, heterosexual, and happily married. Nevermind. Nevermore.

Be it as it may, once Roderick Usher and his financial empire have been introduced, each episode roughly links a member of the Usher family with a specific and well-known tale by Poe. Viewers will quickly recognize familiar titles such as *The Black Cat*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. Seasoned readers of Edgar Allan Poe, on the other hand, might find it somewhat harder to find their bearings in the loose allusiveness of *The Gold-Bug* or *The Pit and the Pendulum*. This process of cross-adaptation, which might more specifically be tagged as fragmentary neo-classical imitation according to Thomas Leitch's taxonomy⁹ was already present to a lesser degree in *The Haunting of Bly*

⁹ Leitch, 2007.

*Manor*¹⁰. It should also be pointed out that cross-adaptation was already there in Epstein's *La chute de la maison Usher*, as it combined Poe's "Usher" with "The Oval Portrait", a 1842 tale also said to have inspired Wilde's main thesis in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

In Flanagan's *Usher*, the original eponymous story mainly operates as a framing hypotext from which other sub-stories will branch out, exploring secondary Poesque – or post-Poesque – narratives or rather astutely disseminating clues for the Dupin-like reader to seize upon, such as Frederick Usher's sudden and cruel pulling out all of wife's teeth in a fit of jealousy tinged with psychosis in episode 6 (an allusion to "Berenice", 1835), or Rufus Griswold's body¹¹ being kept safely walled within the basement of the Usher corporation building in episode 8, an echo to "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846). This does make for some enjoyable hypertextual allusive epiphanies, but is it truly enough to rescue the series from failure? I think not. But then, who am I to judge? Just one viewer among many, and very possibly not the most obvious target audience for a Netflix show.

Overall, reviewers and critics alike have been very positive towards the series, which seems to capture a certain *Zeitgeist* through its Poesque and carnivalesque serial exploration of the fate of the real-life Sackler family. The Sacklers are the founders of Purdue Pharma and recently became the most infamous family to have hit American headlines in the 21st century, mostly for their indirect responsibility in causing thousands of deaths through the consumption of their opioid drugs, starting with Oxycontin. To US audiences, the Sacklers will easily be recognizable behind the Ushers in the series. Like the narrator of the original story by Poe, they have been "ushered", to the delight of contemporary audiences, all too keen to relish, in a rather contemporary standardized and entertaining audiovisual format, of what could be tagged as uniquely American "doomed success story"¹², as some reviewers had it¹³.

¹⁰ The mini-series is mostly adapted from *The Turn of The Screw*, to which some elements pertaining to other Jamesian ghost stories are grafted (*The Jolly Corner*, *The Story of Certain Old Habits*)

¹¹ In the mini-series, Griswold is Usher's former boss, a rather unscrupulous figure fueled by greed and deceit.

¹² Why is this kind of amoral accomplishment a uniquely American story — as American as Poe, a failed military man who bounced around the country's greatest industrial cities, shaped the Romanticist and Gothic traditions that emphasized emotion and atmosphere, struggled to make a living despite his influence, and then died at 40 under mysterious circumstances? (Roxana Haddadi, *Vulture*)

¹³ <https://www.vulture.com/article/the-fall-of-the-house-of-usher-review-mike-flanagan-netflix-horror.html>

CONCLUSION

Flanagan's *The Fall of the House of Usher* belongs to what Dennis Tredy identified in 2020 as pertaining to the current fourth cycle of Poe's adaptations, which invites us to consider not as adaptations *per se*, but rather as "post-adaptations" in a new technological and media environment¹⁴. Unquestionably, Poe, who spent most of his life as a failed man, has become both a mythical champion of negativity as well as an American household name, associated to transgression and decay much more so than failure, which is definitely not an option in our contemporary societies (yet quite often a reality).

There remains, however, the question of assessing whether the 2023 adaptation of *The Fall of the House of Usher* should be regarded as a success or a failure. Though the question cannot be answered in full, it might be useful to consider Robert Giddings' remark on what makes a "successful" adaptation. He writes:

"A successful adaptation of a novel should not be the book. Nor should it be a substitute for the book. If it is truly successful, it should be a work of art in its own right which excites the reader to go re-experience that work in another medium: the novel".

If this wishful call for dialogics is indeed what distinguishes adaptation as success from adaptation as failure, then it might be argued that in our contemporary media environment in which books are ever-more purloined, Flanagan's own *House of Usher* may well leave many viewers locked out of Poe's original monument.

¹⁴ Tredy, 114