

LIA PACINI

*Università di Bergamo*

## Between Fancy and Reality: The Crossing of Borders in Poe's "Ligeia"

### ABSTRACT

The essay aims at exploring the concept of liminality between the borders of reality and fancy, life and death, myth, and fact in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "Ligeia" (1838). If we envision reality as a line endlessly stretching backward and forward, we might imagine the main female character of the tale, Lady Ligeia, as lingering under or above this line, in someplace other, while the narrator is rooted on this very line of materiality. The woman is both a presence and an absence due to her characteristics as a threshold entity between the world of the living and another realm. The narration extensively hints at elements that lead us to believe that Poe's protagonist is trying to access, or tirelessly trying to understand, the limits and potentiality of the gateway to the unknown, with Ligeia being an object able to lead him to it. The paper will not only study the metaphysical implications of Ligeia's persona, but also her interconnection to the world of animals and the mythological links to the siren *Ligeia*. The last section will deal with the geographical motives of the displacement of the story from a continental area close to the Rhine to a typical Gothic panorama, such as the English countryside, as a natural mirror to the feelings of loss experienced by the main character.

**KEYWORDS:** crossings; death; fancy; myth; wilderness; space/place.

"I do remember, but sometimes when I try to remember, I forget."  
A. A. Milne

Gothic literature tells the stories of people and events, but also of something else. It describes beings, creatures, and monsters, reachable, thanks to the crossing of or passing through certain places, be they real (graveyards, castles, woods, abbeys) or imaginary (the mind, the spirit, scientific practices, the Beyond). In the architecture of these narrations, the concept of space takes on a very important role, not only as the setting where incidents happen, but also as the place where psychological changes occur. Here, readers are confronted with absences

more than presences, reason why Gothicism appears more about “the process of discovering the spiritual realm” (Bieganowski, 1988: 185), the uncovering of the unknown and invisible, of what lies hidden somewhere, be it an actual area or a subconscious site. The notion of frontier, of space and of liminality is generally experienced as a geographical and physical concept, measurable and visible. Engaging with abstract ideas, such as borders, limits and dropped veils<sup>1</sup>, requires a particular attention to the psychological side of language. When reading Poe, it is essential to momentarily forget, in a sort of Coleridgean “suspension of disbelief”, the concept of frontier as a mere tangible space. Instead, we will have to dive into the unknown of what cannot be seen, “playing with the instability and permeability of boundaries between reality, fiction, technique and consciousness” (Botting, 2010: 13). Frontiers and crossings are beginnings and ends, what lives and dies, what is real and unreal, what is metaphysic and what esoteric and, of all that can be said, “Ligeia” is undoubtedly a story of liminality and boundaries. In this literary space of fiction, Poe is thus able to create a new reality that merges physical places with imaginary ones, making them interact and mingle with one another. Beverly Voloshin states that “Ligeia” is a tale presenting a “paradoxical structure in which transcendence is figured as an outward or downward movement, as the method for going beyond the universe of Lockean empiricism is to go through it” (Voloshin, 1988: 19). The process of unfolding through a story aimed at recovering something past is indeed a passage through an unknown place.

The fascination for this story lies exactly in its ability to allow the reader to wonder and dive into the most bizarre interpretations. “Ligeia”, and Ligeia, have many facets. Where Marita Nadal sees the female character as the embodiment of the author’s past traumas, Jules Zanger interprets the woman as the incarnation of supernatural and forbidden knowledge. Elisabeta Lopes widens the metaphor towards a more sexual reading, and Maurice Bennett, followed in the same conclusion by Catherine Carter, affirms that: “In a symbolic drama in which the narrator is a poet and Ligeia is the spirit of poetry, Rowena of necessity becomes the antithesis of that ecstatic state in which the poet feels himself wedded to his muse” (Bennett, 1981: 5). John Byers even ventures in envisioning Ligeia’s death as an opium hallucination: “Hence, as the fantasy corpse rises before him and the black hair falls free and the eyes open to reveal his new-found and vital Ligeia,

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<sup>1</sup> “[...] I cannot compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the afterdream of the reveller upon opium – the bitter lapse into everyday life – the hideous dropping of the veil.” Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Stories*, p. 90.

the narrator shrieks, not because Ligeia has returned from the grave to life through the body of a once living and now dead but entirely visionary Rowena, but because Ligeia has never been dead at all" (Byers, 1980: 44). In an essay on Poe's stories, Leland Person tackles the racial implications of different tales and even cites Toni Morrison, who is said to have "challenged American literary scholars to discover a racial presence even in texts where race seems absent" (Bloom, 2006: 129). Although this is not the central topic of the present essay, it is, nonetheless, interesting to underline how much a story which seems of easy interpretation might hide deep social and historical inferences. Anyhow, what is common to all criticism, is that "Ligeia" cannot only be read as a literal recount of supernatural circumstances by an untrustworthy narrator, as a psychotropic opium dream or as a simple narration of odd events, but it must be interpreted as a story with many layers and superstructures.

The narration opens with a process of reminiscing, a quest of a man trying to recover something missing or hard to find: the "how, when or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia" (62). What he is looking for is not something visible, though. Up to now, literature has investigated on this "monomania" (Basler, 1994: 364) from the part of the main character as an obsessive strive for a forbidden knowledge<sup>2</sup> that only Ligeia is able to give (presumably the ability to cross the boundaries between life and death) and which the narrator never fully acquires, thus, incapacitated to truly master the empirical world. But what if, instead, he has trespassed the threshold of the unknown but, too unlimited for the limitedness of a mortal man to bear, he has forgotten? Or, maybe he, "having once inhabited the realm of the Ideal, seeks event unto madness to recreate his lost ecstasy"? (Gargano, 1962: 338). This might be the reason of him stating: "Long years have since elapsed, and my memory is feeble through much suffering" (62). A more possible and common interpretation for a Gothic piece of literature might be, instead, a punishment with memory loss and feebleness for the overreaching of human intellectual and physical limits, very much like *Frankenstein*<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Carter rightly states that we often come across "tales in which women and death so often seem to be wedded in an indissoluble embrace" (Carter, 2003: 45). Through his search, the protagonist wants to reveal the secrets of trespassing the limit of bodily enclosures to get to what lies beyond, grasping the feminine sensibility and acquiring the wholeness of both masculine and feminine.

<sup>3</sup> Frankenstein's overreaching in dealing with matters beyond life's confines is punished through the deprivation of his loved ones from the part of the Creature. He dies never fulfilling his desire of killing the monster he has created.

Ligeia, though, is but a name, a detailed memory of a physical body which lingers in the mind of the main character. At the same time, she is fleeting and ungraspable: a “vision”, a “shadow”, an “opium-dream”, “divine” and supreme. Ligeia’s absence of rootedness into time or space and her lack of substantial presence is also explained by the fact that her paternal name is missing<sup>4</sup>, which makes her even more unengaged with society and cut off from the “kinship structure” of the civilized community (“[...] her etherealized body signifies that she is no longer fixed in the realm of the living”, Bronfen, 1992: 331). Also, Lopes affirms that Ligeia, as a female character, “resists being defined by means of words, detail that removes her from any concrete place in the text” (Lopes, 2010: 41). However ephemeral, though, Ligeia’s body, or the memory of it, also serves as a shrine, a door, a repository of a knowledge the narrator strives to achieve and discover. Ligeia, both as a body and as an entity, represents the place where the metamorphosis of life-death-rebirth will take place.

### 1.1 “Those large, those shining, those divine orbs!”

Ligeia is a creature from another world, which makes her of a ‘strangeness’ unique to *this* world. She is both angel and shadow, and her alterity is channeled, thanks to the intermediation of the narrator, who describes her in terms of angelic presence and unfathomable beauty, “more wildly divine than the phantasies which hovered about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos” (63). While Ligeia’s ineffability is indeed a leading characteristic of her figure, the narrator presents her with meticulous detail<sup>5</sup>. From the very first paragraphs, he tries to engage the reader, and himself, in a delirium of reminiscence aimed at convincing himself, and, again, the reader, of her existence by externalizing the specter through words, “to make an existentially absent object present to the narrator’s mental sight, to give shape to her imaginary presence” (Von Mücke, 2006: 151). Ligeia’s physical description, though, is relevant only to the degree to which it contributes to a feeling of perturbation and mystery, with the purpose of marking her alterity not

<sup>4</sup> “And now, while I write, a recollection flashes upon me that I have never known the paternal name of her who was my friend and my betrothed, [...]” (62).

<sup>5</sup> “[...] her rare learning, her singular yet placid cast of beauty, and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language. [...] I would in vain attempt to portray the majesty, the quiet ease, of her demeanor, or the incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of her footfall. [...] the dear music of her low sweet voice, [...] the contour of her lofty and pale forehead, [...] the skin rivalling the purest ivory.” (62-63).

just from the ensuing wife, Rowena, but also from the rest of human beings. Poe's metafictional abilities allow the reader to understand that the woman's appearance is still a projection and a memory filtered by the eyes of the narrator.

"Poe offers unique portrayals of evil, erudite female consumptives, and vampires" (Stephanou, 2013: 43) and Lady Ligeia embodies all the characteristics necessary to be part of a Gothic story: the singularity of her physical presence ("the features of Ligeia were not of a classic regularity [...], and felt that there was much of 'strangeness' pervading it", 63), the possession of extensive powers<sup>6</sup>, the access to forbidden knowledge ("I have spoken of the learning of Ligeia: it was immense – such as I have never known in a woman", 66) her metamorphic abilities<sup>7</sup> ("a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water", 65), her vampiric tendencies ("I saw, fall within the goblet, as if from some invisible spring in the atmosphere of the room, three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid", 74) and her involuntary ability to consume the narrator's mind and body through her presence and allure ("my memory is feeble through much suffering", 62, "She died; – and I, crushed into the very dust with sorrow, could no longer endure the lonely desolation of my dwelling in the dim and decaying city by the Rhine", 70, "feelings of utter abandonment", 70, "I had become a bounden slave to the trammels of opium", 70). Lastly, her vicinity to the world of shadows marks her undoubtable divergence ("She came and departed as a shadow", 63). Even her very name has a musical quality that announces the particularity of the character, "quality secured chiefly by the use of long vowels, liquids and nasals" (Stovall, 1925: 198). Ligeia's perfection is an additional clue to her alterity (hers is "a beauty of beings above or apart from the earth", 64) and might be a further proof of her provenance from a different reality, allegedly the narrator's "heated

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<sup>6</sup> The power of reincarnation. "[...] she let fall from her head, unloosened, the ghastly ceremonies which had confined it, and there streamed forth [...], huge masses of long and disheveled hair; it was blacker than the raven wings of the midnight! And now slowly opened the eyes of the figure which stood before me. 'Here then, at least,' I shrieked aloud, can I never – can I never be mistaken – these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes – of my lost love – of the lady – of the LADY LIGEIA" (77-78).

<sup>7</sup> Ligeia's metamorphic nature is also subtly alluded to through the description of the nature of her "marble hand". Marble is known to be a type of rock created through the metamorphic process of sedimentary rocks such as limestone or dolomite and their subsequent crystallization. Other than this characteristic, marble seems a perfect element to describe the supernatural traits of Ligeia's being precisely because of her unnatural stillness, very much like crystal, suggesting that she was never gifted with the warmth and colour of living creatures.

fancy”, or another dimension. Above all the elements of her persona, the one detail that departs from classical regularity and slips from the narrator’s meticulous description is the image of Ligeia’s eyes, into which are channeled the mystery and bafflement of the entire story<sup>8</sup>.

The eyes, in “Ligeia”, are the only element which lacks standardized perfection, and exactly because of this deficiency, Ligeia appears even more perfect in her Baconian imperfection: “There is no exquisite beauty [...] without some strangeness in the proportion” (63). The eyes:

“[...] were, I must believe, far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race. They were even fuller than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nour-jahad. [...] The hue of the orbs was the most brilliant of black [...]. The ‘strangeness,’ however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the *expression*. Ah, word of no meaning! behind whose vast latitude of mere sound we intrench our ignorance of so much of the spiritual. The expression of the eyes of Ligeia! How for long hours have I pondered upon it! How have I, through the whole of midsummer night, struggled to fathom it! What was it – that something more profound than the well of Democritus – which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What *was* it? I was possessed with a passion to discover. Those eyes! Those large, those shining, those divine orbs! They became to me twin stars of Leda, and I to them devoutest to astrologists.”

Ligeia’s eyes are impossible to locate as physical features entirely, and words fail to do them justice: “the narrator insists on his inability to name or comprehend this unique feature by pointing out that the term *expression* is an empty signifier, a mere sound” (Von Mücke, 2006: 153). The expression is the element which allows the narrator to perceive, even if slightly, the alterity of her world. The eyes, again, are the object of a spiritual quest and they represent the door to a higher knowledge, to a “wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden!” (67), to the

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<sup>8</sup> This detail is particularly stressed during Ligeia’s fight with her illness, when her “wild” eyes are described as “blazed with a too – too glorious effulgence” (67). If we consider the period in which the short story was written, we can see how they, as expression of the soul into the container that is the body, the eyes become hoarders of instincts, obscurities, and incomprehension that the man of the story (and, thus, the man of the Eighteenth century) cannot fully comprehend. The woman, as a being somehow outside of standardized civility because of her natural alterity, acquires the role of she who has the keys to the gateway leading to the mysterious, precisely because she has embraced that relationship between body and mind that the man of the 1800s refused in order to conform to social demands.

beyond, to the secrets of femininity<sup>9</sup> and to everything the narrator is not able to grasp because of his finiteness and impermanence. Also, orbs and stars ("luminous orbs" / "twin stars of Leda", 65) are terms that link Ligeia to something higher, spiritual, even religious. (332). "[...] traditionally the eye is the source of insight and particularly of insight into the ideal and the beautiful" (Schulman, 1970: 259) and, therefore, participating Ligeia in the essence of the unknown, looking into her eyes is to look directly into the mystery of nature and into beauty itself.

The coinciding features between the world of shadows and Ligeia seem to be numerous. The woman, though, seems to share attributes to the animal sphere as well, especially with the macro-area of avifauna. If we are to find an element able to link her to wildlife, it would be her puzzling and mystifying eyes, which, alone, might ascertain the entire bafflement of her being. Much of her orbs' description clearly has plenty in common with the non-human, generating feelings of both uneasiness and distress.

A few years after writing "Ligeia", Poe published a poem called "The Raven" (1985), where he described the corvid's eyes in similar terms as he described Ligeia's<sup>10</sup>:

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing  
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's  
core (32).

Again, the author seems to raise a similar stance when writing:

"And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting  
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;  
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is  
dreaming" (33).

<sup>9</sup> "He finds, too, in the „immense" learning of Ligeia a true complement to her great beauty. Her power of will is so great that she is able to transfer her own spirit into the corpse of the Lady Rowena, the hero's second bride. Thus she appeals to Poe's scientific mind as well as to his aesthetic sense. To these attributes, beauty, and intellectuality, he needs only to add supreme love in order to make his heroine the incarnation of feminine perfection" (Stovall, 202). As common in the male imaginary of late Eighteenth century, femininity appears ambiguous and, in the story, it seems something that the narrator, being a male, cannot truly and fully grasp and Ligeia appears to be the only means to gain knowledge over the two genres.

<sup>10</sup> The two also share more than just the similarity in the eyes: "Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling, / By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore" and Ligeia, with her "raven-black, the glossy, the luxuriant and naturally-curling tresses" (63) had, in her appearance, the "majesty, the quiet ease, of her demeanor, or the incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of her footfall" (63).

Requirements for pertaining to wildness and unfathomability, then, are the inscrutability and unintelligibility of the features.

It is no chance that the animals to which Poe relies mostly to when it comes to describing figures lingering between worlds are ravens. In most religions, corvids are psychopomps and bearers of prophecies and insight. Lawler stresses that symbolism is highly present in Poe's "The Raven" and that it develops mostly in the figure of the raven as carrier of spiritual messages and omens, be they good or ill (Lawler, 1978: 103), while Jones writes: "At length he calls the raven 'wretch,' 'thing of evil,' 'fiend,' and other names, suspects him of diabolical prophetic powers, and shrieks at him to get out. Pretty clearly, this creature is more than a harmless pet" (Jones, 1958: 186). In Greek mythology the raven was the messenger of Apollo and agent of ill missives. Poe's raven is, as well, a token of ill omen:

'Prophet!' said I, 'thing of evil! – prophet still, if bird or devil!  
By that Heaven that bends above us – by that God we both  
adore –  
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,  
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore –  
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name  
Lenore.'

Quoth the Raven 'Nevermore.'  
(32)

Ligeia and the raven, then, seem to share not only material features, but also the repetitiveness of their messages and sounds. As the raven repeats himself in the intolerable reiteration of 'Nevermore' and in its incessant "tapping, tapping"/ [...] Tapping somewhat louder than before" (29-30), the dying Ligeia, as well, repeats, as some kind of spell, Glanville's passage: "I bent to them my ear and distinguished, again, the concluding words of the passage in Glanville – '*Man doth not yield him to the angel, nor undo death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will*'" (69). If we consider Ligeia as semblant to this particular bird and somehow implicated with its symbology, we might assume that, in the story, the woman might be some sort of messenger herself, a messenger of a knowledge or of a missive from one world to the other. It is thus clear that it is Ligeia's orbs that represent the key to the crossing of a frontier and the gateway to that mysterious knowledge so yearned for the narrator.



## 1.2 Ligeia as *Lígeia*

Ligeia's "strangeness in the proportion" is a clear reference to something non-human manifested in her, with her raven-black hair and the nose's "scarcely perceptible tendency to the aquiline" (64), almost as if she had a beak. In folkloric iconography, women were usually associated with animals such as cats, foxes, and even spiders, as in the myth of Arachne (Castoldi, 2012: 187). Poe chooses the bird-world. Winged beings were also the sirens, with whom Ligeia shares the name, the metamorphic origins, and the persuasive allure of the voice. The very first thing that brings Ligeia and the sirens together is their liminal geo-localization. The sirens lived at the edge of the sea; at their backs, a field of bones, so that life and death accompanied them always (Castoldi, 214). Ligeia, as well, lives between life and death, not really human but not yet a shadow. She represents the threshold between here and the beyond. Her very name, *Lígeia*, is not a random choice in the story. Scholars and commentators of the *Odyssey* first mentioned the name, which also appeared later in Licophrone's *Alessandra* (and in Apollonio Rodio's *Argonautica* as well), designating one of the three suicidal mermaids (together with *Parthenópe* and *Leukosía*) protagonist of a prophecy. Of the three, *Lígeia* is referred to as she who has the sweetest and most melodious voice. The etymology of her name, in fact, comes from the word *ligys* which indicates an acute, clear, and penetrating sound (Bettini-Spina, 2007: 105), one melodious to the point of infiltrating into the mind of the one listening, compelling him. In "Ligeia", the woman seems to be given this name to stress her perfection by underlining the musicality of the triphthong, [...] it is by that sweet word alone – by Ligeia – that I bring before mine eyes in fancy the image of her who is no more" (62), and of "the dear music of her low sweet voice" (63).

Many times, the narrator refers to his total devotion and resignation to Ligeia's guidance, to "her infinite supremacy" (66) and "immense" learning, like a child<sup>11</sup> but also very much like a sailor resigning to the allure of a mermaid and to "the fierce energy [...] of the wild words she habitually uttered" (66). The role of the voice also recurs later in the story when the narrator assists Ligeia, anguished and feeble in her fight against death, and listens, "entranced, to a melody more than mortal – to assumptions and aspirations which mortality had never before

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<sup>11</sup> "[...] I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy as to resign myself, with a childlike confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied during the earlier years of our marriage" (66).

known" (67) and, again, on her deathbed, when Ligeia murmurs, in a sort of siren-like allure, Glanville's passage. It is well known (from Homer's first narrations for example) that mermaids used their voice to entice sailors, so that they would lose their senses<sup>12</sup> and, at the same time, lose control of the ships. On the rocks, the mermaids awaited the unwilling victims who quickly became their food. One might venture into guessing that Ligeia's intention, being a creature from the beyond and using her voice to entice, might be that of corrupting the narrator or doing him harm. On the contrary, the raven-black haired maiden does not seem prone to kill or submit her husband in any way. Her role and aim are more similar to that suggested by Cicero, who believed sirens attracted people to their cliffs or imprisoned them there through the content of their chants, and not their physical appearance: the global knowledge of the history of the world (Bettini-Spina, 135). Ligeia seems to have the same mastery in the things of the world, so much that the narrator, marveled, states:

I have spoken of the learning of Ligeia: it was immense - such as I have never known in a woman. In the classical tongues was she deeply proficient, and as far as my own acquaintance extended in regard to the modern dialects of Europe, I have never known her at fault. Indeed upon any theme of the most admired, because simply the most abstruse of the boasted erudition of the academy, have I ever found Ligeia at fault? [...] I said her knowledge was such as I have never known in a woman - but where breathes the man who has traversed, and successfully, all the wide areas of moral, physical, and mathematical science? I saw not then what I now clearly perceive, that the acquisitions of Ligeia were gigantic, were astounding [...] (66).

It is not the mode of singing, then, but the conviction of the matter sung to do the magic. If we look at the text with this in mind, the narrator of "Ligeia" might have lost his mental sanity because of Ligeia's instructions to which he, as a child, is unconditionally resigned. It is not Ligeia's fault though, that the narrator is not able to sustain the force of her intentions. Her knowledge of matters mysterious is unattainable for the limitedness of the human narrator who, boldly and careless

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<sup>12</sup> If Ligeia was indeed *Ligeia*, the mermaid of old, this would explain the loss of memory and difficulty in remembering from the part of the narrator. Much like after a traumatic experience, the main character seems to have passed the trance of the siren Ligeia and now he cannot recall the details of the events after the enchantment. It is her voice and her eyes that completed the spell: "[...] in our endeavors to recall to memory something long forgotten, we often find ourselves upon the very verge of remembrance, without being able, in the end, to remember. And, thus, how frequently, in my intense scrutiny of Ligeia's eyes, have I felt approaching the full knowledge of their expression - felt it approaching - yet not quite be mine - and so at length entirely depart!" (65).

of the risks, still tries to possess. In this sense, both sailors, craving the song of the sirens, and the narrator, striving for Ligeia's knowledge, are punished for trying to grasp such *connaissance*. Bound by the limitation of the physical world, sailors are destined to a gruesome death into the abyss, while the narrator of "Ligeia" is condemned to lose the object of his love.

Sirens, always considered perils of the sea, killing mercilessly innocent lives, were first delicate beings, virgin and fair, before undergoing an unfortunate fate which made them wicked creatures. Bettini and Spina comment:

"The Sirens of myth look as if they were born – if we follow the logic of some tales – from a metamorphosis. They were once virgins, young women voted to chastity. A disvalue, for Aphrodite. There they are, then, transformed in hybrids, half women, half birds. Then, though, in time, a second metamorphosis hit them. Strange, really, much stranger than that which the myth had created. They turned human creatures once again [...]"<sup>13</sup>

Sirens are usually described as fish-women or "bird-woman" (*fanciulle-uccello*). As the mere- people then, who metamorphosed twice from women to half-beings and from half-beings to women, Ligeia too underwent the transition from living being to dead element and, again, from dead element to living being, thanks to Rowena's sacrifice.

Nowadays, mermaid's iconography tends to represent them as fish-tailed creatures, but the oldest representations and recounts of sirens envision them with the lower part equipped with bird feet and the upper part of the body as women, echo of their once beautiful appearance. The similarity to Ligeia is uncanny. As birds<sup>14</sup> are delicate in their movements exactly because of their aerial nature, Ligeia too moves with an "incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of her footfall" (63), with "a gentle foot-fall upon the carpet" (74). Birds, also, are extremely difficult to grasp (as Ligeia's expression is) and, once captured, they feel ephemeral and delicate (as Ligeia, "in her latter days, even emaciated", 63). Ethereal and perfect, Ligeia resembles the fallen angels who, descended from the skies and having lost their wings, were approached as humans. Surprisingly enough,

<sup>13</sup> "Le sirene del mito sembrano nascere – se seguiamo la logica di qualche racconto – da una metamorfosi. Erano vergini, fanciulle votate alla castità. Un disvalore, secondo Afrodite. Eccole, quindi, trasformate in ibridi, metà donne, metà uccelli. Poi, però, nel tempo, le colpì una seconda metamorfosi. Strana, in realtà, molto più strana di quella che il mito aveva escogitato. Tornarono di nuovo creature umane [...]" (Bettini-Spina, 2007: 131)

<sup>14</sup> The *serinus serinus*, or European serin, has the same root as *seréin* (see note 10), and is a bird of the family of finches.

Bettini and Spina write that sirens were once collocated in the architecture of the eight celestial circles, which moved thanks to the harmony of their voices (Bettini-Spina, 2007: 107).

“It appears, then, [...] that we find linked [...] narratives showing self-determined, self-reliant, self-confident men suddenly captured by natural forces beyond their comprehension or control and whirled against their wills into the abyss” (Zanger, 1978: 541). The abyss of which Zanger talks echoes the place (the bottom of the sea), where mermaids brought men once they had allured them with their siren song. The abyss, for the narrator, might be that incomprehensible world behind the “strangeness” and “expression” of Ligeia’s eyes.

### 1.3 Geography of spaces and geography of minds

“The matter of space presents a material and physical dimension, and, at the same time, it deals with the imaginative and symbolic sphere, from the moment that it refers, most of all, to the models in which space is perceived, described and represented”<sup>15</sup> (Brazzelli, 2015: 27). The concept of space and frontier, border, and liminality implies the perception of a certain place, the feelings associated to it, its representation in real life and its unfolding in the mind of the watcher. Limited by the language used to describe said spaces, the border poses another threat to the actual representation of what is thought and how this thought is translated into words. As Botting states, “Poe’s tales tend to redouble rather than resolve Gothic effects, a twist which initiates their dark modernity and aims at extending psychological disturbance, replaying the usual diseased, drug-fueled or feverish imagining of the protagonist at the level of narration and reading” (Botting, 2010: 9). Poe’s spaces exist thanks to the imaginative force he gives them through the voice of his characters. The speaking voice in “Ligeia”, as a matter of fact, is masterful in creating such eerie and grotesque effects through the detailed narration of the period preceding Rowena’s death and Ligeia’s resurrection. As a representational strategy dealing with inner movements, language becomes the tool and limit where inside and outside meet. While the first part of the story deals with the materiality of Ligeia’s being and her transcendental role, in the second part it is the landscape and architecture that become the real protagonists. The reader

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<sup>15</sup> “La questione spaziale presenta una dimensione materiale, fisica e, nello stesso tempo, riguarda la sfera immaginativa e simbolica, dal momento che si riferisce soprattutto alle modalità con cui lo spazio è percepito, descritto e rappresentato” (Brazzelli, 2015: 27).

is here offered an insight on the representation of inner spaces mirrored by the "wildest and least frequented" English panorama and by the decoration of the bridal chamber, which he will share with the newly wedded Lady Rowena Trevanion. Thanks to his descriptive abilities, Poe gives concrete stance to the load of emotions, fantasies, and symbolic elements (Brazzelli, 2015: 18) that will help in the deciphering of the events of the narration. The narrators of both "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia" "focus [their] attention less on what they would seem to point to (Beauty, Truth) and more on what happens in them as they attempt to express the ineffable" (Bieganski, 1988: 175).

Having failed to conquer immortality (Ligeia's and, by consequence, his own), the narrator loses his beloved wife to death and is forced by grief to move from the "dim and decaying city by the Rhine" (70), in the hope that the "weary and aimless wandering" (70) provoked by the loss of Ligeia might be mitigated. The description of the designated place where he is to spend his mourning, though, is not a peaceful sight. It is presented as "gloomy", "dreary" and "savage", adjectives suited to match and heighten his despair. The protagonist clearly states that his decision of moving to England and his precise choice of purchasing an old abbey was promoted by the matching of the English landscape with his feelings: "The gloomy and dreary grandeur of the building, the almost savage aspect of the domain, the many melancholy and time-honored memories connected with both, had much in unison with the feelings of utter abandonment which had driven me into that remote and unsocial region of the country" (70). The background, then, shifts to a more secluded area<sup>16</sup> and a more natural landscape, precisely because nature can be imbued with the psychological gloominess of the narrator. Nature becomes the space where everything can happen, the margin where the tangible experience and the inconsequence of thought meet, allowing the narrator to rekindle the memory of Ligeia.

Apart from nature, which, in Gothic literature, almost appears as a being on its own and must be left untouched, the space the main character is most eager to adorn "with a child-like perversity, and perchance with a faint hope of alleviating my sorrows" (70) is the bridal room. Whereas the beginning of the story shows an incapability of remembering details and events revolving around the figure of Ligeia<sup>17</sup> because of the feebleness of the narrator's mind (highly inconsistent

<sup>16</sup> The same happens, for example, in *The Castle of Otranto*, where the castle becomes that place far from society and rules, where everything can happen, real or not.

<sup>17</sup> As an ulterior reason for his forgetfulness, the narrator states: "Or, perhaps, I cannot now bring these points to mind, because, in truth, the character of my beloved, her rare learning,

stance given the minuteness of his actual descriptions), the second part presents an extensive and extremely thorough rendition of the master bedroom, so much as to occupy several pages: “I minutely remember the details of the chamber – yet I am sadly forgetful on topics of deep moment – and here there was no system, no keeping, in the fantastic display, to take hold upon the memory” (70-71). Concerning the abbey, he states: “I must not pause to detail. Let me speak only of that one chamber [...]” (70)<sup>18</sup>. Castoldi writes that, in “The Oval Portrait” (1842), the apparition of the portrait allows for the recovery of the repressed of the castle as if life had deserted the very place (Castoldi, 2012: 154). The same, in reverse, happens in “Ligeia”. The tapestry, the overall furnishing and the space of the bridal room are the actual means enabling Ligeia’s return. It is not life to desert the castle, in this case, but it is life coming back to it. In hindsight, it is not so strange that the narrator wants to embellish it with “more than regal magnificence” (70):

“Some few ottomans and golden candelabra, of Eastern figure, were in various stations about – and there was the couch, too – the bridal couch – of an Indian model, and low, and sculptured of solid ebony, with a pall-like canopy above. In each of the angles of the chamber stood on end a gigantic sarcophagus of black granite, from the tombs of the kings over against Luxor, with their aged lids full of immemorial sculpture. But in the draping of the apartment lay, alas! The chief phantasy of all. The lofty walls, gigantic in height – even unproportionably so – were hung from summit to foot, in vast folds, with a heavy and massive-looking tapestry – tapestry of a material which was found alike as a carpet on the floor, as a covering dot the ottomans and the ebony bed, as a canopy for the bed, and as the gorgeous volutes of the curtains which partially shaded the window. The material was the richest cloth of gold. It was spotted all over, at irregular intervals, with arabesque figures, about a foot in diameter, and wrought upon the cloth in patterns of the most jetty black. But these figures partook of the true character of the arabesque only when regarded from a single point of view. By a contrivance now common, and indeed traceable to a very remote period of antiquity, they were made changeable in aspect. To one entering the room, they bore the appearance of simple monstrosities; but upon a farther advance, this appearance gradually departed; and step by step, as the visitor moved his station in the chamber, he saw himself surrounded by endless succession of the ghastly forms which belong to the superstition of the

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her singular yet placid cast of beauty, and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical voice, made their way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive that they have been unnoticed and unknown” (62).

<sup>18</sup> In the description of the abbey and bridal room and in the use of inner spaces as places to make things happen, Poe seems to recall the narration of “The Oval Portrait”: the chateau “very lately abandoned [...]”. Its decorations were rich, yet tattered and antique. Its walls were hung with tapestry [...]” (201). The room in question is, as the one in “Ligeia”, positioned in a turret and while in this one the fair maiden passed away, in reverse, in the one in “Ligeia”, the dead come back to life.

Norman, or arise in the guilty slumbers of the monk. The phantasmagoric effect was vastly heightened by the artificial introduction of a strong continual current of wind behind the draperies – giving a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole" (71-72).

The decorum of the room is decided with attention and care, almost as if the choice of its furnishing would, in some way, promote Ligeia's comeback or, at least, make the memory of her thrive. The narrator does not seem to care about the external outlet of the building: "Yet although the external abbey, with its verdant decay hanging about it, suffered but little alteration, I gave way, with a child-like perversity, and perchance with a faint hope of alleviating my sorrows, to a display of more than regal magnificence within" (70).

Both in the first part and in the second, we are in front of the frontier of inside and outside provided by Ligeia as a body and by the chamber as a physical space. Those two become not just mere tangible elements, but portions of experience onto which the narrator pours his own conscience. Here as well, he clearly remembers the ornamentation of that one room, declaring the rest as futile absurdities. It is clear, then, how he perceives reality as an alterity, and his mental creation as the truth, subverting the normal set of things. It is clear, then, that what he creates inside of his mind is precise and easily summoned, hence, the extremely detailed recollection of objects and furniture, while the rest, that is reality, fades. It is the writing itself which makes the unreal real exactly because of it being written on paper. Language, then, acquires, as well as space, a role as frontier where the immaterial becomes material.

In the last section of the story, we come across a merging and subverting of the world of the living and that of the dead in the process of Rowena's body being given in exchange (or better in sacrifice) for Ligeia's return. In this case, the limits of life and death are transcended through the merging and changing of one body into another, from a living being who, accessed the world of shadows because of her departing, comes back in the form of a previously departed entity. It almost seems as if Rowena and Ligeia met in the afterlife and exchanged roles: one leaves life and the other one takes it back to be rejoined with her beloved husband.

The description of the transformation of Rowena's body in Ligeia's takes the shape of a real metamorphic process:

The greater part of the fearful night had worn away, and she who had been dead, once again stirred – and now more vigorously than hitherto, although from a dissolution more appalling in its utter hopelessness than any [...]. The corpse, I repeat, stirred, and now more vigorously than before. The hues of life flushed up with unwonted energy into the countenance – the limbs relaxed – and, save that the eyelids were yet pressed



heavily together, and that the bandages and draperies of the grave still imparted their charnel character to the figure, I might have dreamed that Rowena had indeed shaken off, utterly, the fetters of Death. But if this idea was not, even then, altogether adopted, I could at least doubt no longer, when, arising from the bed, tottering, with feeble steps, with closed eyes, and with the manner of one bewildered in a dream, the thing that was enshrouded advanced boldly and palpably into the middle of the apartment.

[...] Could it, indeed, be the living Rowena who confronted me? Could it indeed be Rowena at all – the fair aired, the blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine? Why, why should I doubt it? The bandage lay heavily about the mouth –but then might it not be the mouth of the breathing Lady of Tremaine? And the cheeks–there were the roses as in her noon of life –yes, these might indeed be the fair cheeks of the living Lady of Tremaine. And the chin, with its dimples, as in health, might it not be hers? –but had she then grown taller since her malady? What inexpressible madness seized me with that thought? One bound, and I had reached her feet! Shrinking from my touch, she let fall from her head, unloosened, the ghastly cerements which had confined it, and there streamed forth, into the rushing atmosphere of the chamber, huge masses of long and dishevelled hair; it was blacker than the raven wings of the midnight! And now slowly opened the eyes of the figure which stood before me. “Here then, at least,” I shrieked aloud, “can I never –can I never be mistaken – these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes –of my lost love –of the lady –of the LADY LIGEIA” (77-78).

As stated in section 1.1, the narrator had already underlined Ligeia metamorphic abilities (see p. 4), so it comes as no real surprise that her final impact on the story should be one of transformation. Furthermore, Ligeia’s name is repeated twenty-seven times in the short story and, from the very beginning, her name seems to be often uttered as an incantation able to evoke her: “Ligeia! Ligeia! Buried in studies of a nature more than all else adapted to deaden impressions of the outward world, it is by that sweet name – by Ligeia – that I bring before mine eyes in fancy the image of her who is no more” (62). Her name is the very essence of the tale and the last word of the narration, evidence of its power to revive the woman Ligeia to the world of the living.

## Conclusion

The intensity of the narrator’s will seems to have finally surpassed the limits of life and death. His desire to be reunited with Ligeia has proven so strong as to bring her back to life. The narrator opens the tale alone, reminiscing the past where Ligeia was alive. The end of the story, though, tells us that Ligeia has come back to life. Where has she gone then? Why is the narrator hurting for her



absence if she succeeded in coming back to life? By subverting the ordinary set of things, Poe opens the abyss of infinite possibilities. The author seems to leave many unanswered questions, putting himself in the same position as the wondering main character who has no answers to what has happened to him. Ligeia, then, appears as a figure existing only in the mind of the narrator, in the unstable boundary between reality, fancy, consciousness and unconsciousness, "no longer alive but still undead" (Bloom, 2006: viii). In this way, the story gives space to a delirium, be it psychological or psychotropic.

At the heart of the gothic narrative lies the contraposition between good and bad, real, and unreal, stable, and unstable in order to give voice and solidarity to an epoch of uncertainty. As there are no solutions to the problems of this reality, literature tries to mirror this instability by giving no solution and by setting its stories in the uncertain panorama of the supernatural. At the end of "Ligeia", the reader is even more baffled than at the beginning. The narrator, and the author, have given no answers to the events narrated and, instead, have uncovered the abyss of the uncanny even more. "Ligeia" is a story merging wake and sleep, real and unreal, but, mostly, it is a story of metamorphosis, of a change from one state to another and, in the in between, there is a mystery yet to solve.

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## LIA PACINI

Università di Bergamo

lia.pacini@unibg.it

ORCID code: 0000-0003-1680-4241