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► **To cite this version:**

Olivier Bordier. Tales of a Traveller, Part 1: From Ghost Stories to Stories of Madness. Alizés :  
Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1999, Essays on Washington Irving, 17, pp.38-53. hal-02346436

**HAL Id: hal-02346436**

**<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02346436v1>**

Submitted on 5 Nov 2019

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# Tales of a Traveller, Part 1: From Ghost Stories to Stories of Madness

In the decades following the Declaration of Independence, the United States sought literary independence from the European — particularly the English — model, and it is rather striking that many of the principal characters of the first major American works were (mono)maniacs:<sup>1</sup> men engrossed in their quest for some forbidden knowledge, or obsessed with revenge or sin, teem in Nathaniel Hawthorne's tales<sup>2</sup> and merge into the characters of Reverend Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth; insane narrators and murderers abound in Edgar Allan Poe's stories; Herman Melville made radical changes to his whaling novel and turned it into a tragic hunt led by a mad captain; insanity already was at the core of Charles Brockden Brown's novels. Marcus Cunliffe's comment on Brown can be read as a question regarding the concern of the budding American literature with madness:<sup>3</sup> could this be "a particularly American psychological quirkiness,"<sup>4</sup> and how can this interest be accounted for?

Brown's interest in madness stemmed from his own curiosity and pervaded his Americanization of the gothic novel. His achievement is to have replaced the traditional setting with an American environment, and to have endowed setting and atmosphere with psychological meaning: the action is as much inside the character as without; the horror comes

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<sup>1</sup> The pioneers of psychiatry actually defined different kinds of insanity, which were themselves divided into finer categories, and distinguished "mania" from "monomania." Both terms apply to a state in which someone directs all his or her attention to a particular thing; the difference is a matter of degree: the monomaniac's understanding remains relatively clear, whereas the maniac's intellectual faculties are disturbed. "Monomania" was gradually used in the nineteenth century as a substitute for "melancholia."

<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, all quotations from *The Library of America*.

<sup>3</sup> "Madness" here is used in the broadest sense: it is mania as well as melancholy, hysteria or insanity, and denotes a more or less abnormal behavior, which does not necessarily imply a complete degeneration of the mental faculties.

<sup>4</sup> *The Literature of the United States*, 66.

not so much from outside dangers as from within, and the haunted labyrinth is internalized; the character is both haunting and haunted: a shadow of himself, walking in his sleep, the prey of ideas obsessing him to the point of madness.<sup>5</sup>

As I will attempt to show, a similar dynamics seems to be at work in Washington Irving's tales (more specifically in Part 1 of *Tales of a Traveller*) that link ghost stories and stories of madness in a relation of thematic and structural osmosis, the former evolving into the latter and each illuminating the other, as the most frightening ghosts turn out to be the obsessing ideas that torment a fragile mind till reason loses control. Whereas ghost encounters may be interpreted as tall tales, or the figments of a fanciful imagination set loose by excess (of wine or food<sup>6</sup>), temporary disorder (illness) or a propitious environment (a dismal place, likely to be haunted), the hallucinations of an insane mind are less easy to talk away, for insanity is a fact, and is all the more terrifying when it cannot be attributed to illness, but grows out of the person's thoughts. Morbid ideas, a quest for an ideal object, guilt, are so many ghosts that

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<sup>5</sup> Brockden Brown: *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker*.

<sup>6</sup> Excess of food is an explanation frequently put forward in Dickens' fantastic tales: "Tom was fond of hot punch — I may venture to say he was very fond of hot punch."

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In about half an hour, Tom woke up, with a start, from a confused dream of tall men and tumblers of punch . . . nothing but queer chairs danced before his eyes, kicking up their legs, jumping over each other's back, and playing all kinds of antics" ("The Bagman's Story", 25; 27).

This, however, does not explain everything: Tom does find the letter the old chair had told him about, so that the fantastic remains unsatisfactorily accounted for — but then, that is part of the magic of such tales that everything should not be explainable. As for Scrooge, his attempt at rationalizing the irrational and joking "[to keep ] down his terror" fails, and so does the nervous gentleman's remark:

"Why do you doubt your senses?'"[ Marley's ghost asked]

'Because,' said Scrooge, 'a little thing affects them. A small disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!' (*A Christmas Carol* — Stave 1, 59).

"The uneasiness of my position made my slumber troubled, and laid at the mercy of all kinds of wild and fearful dreams; now it was that my perfidious dinner and supper rose in rebellion against my peace. . . . In short, I had a violent fit of the nightmare. Some strange indefinite evil seemed hanging over me which I could not shake off" ("The Mysterious Picture", 425).

haunt the character, who ends up a walking shadow, and tries through his account to come to terms with the horrible reality; the story becomes an attempt either at keeping truth at bay, at rationalizing events (even by means of their reinterpretation and rearrangement into a ghost story), or at exorcism.

Ghost stories originally are serious stories, meant to give hope (belief in an afterlife) or to frighten. In popular lore, the ghost is the spirit of the dead, that stays or returns among the mortals to fulfill a mission: he may be here to help ("the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Yet To Come" illuminate human kindness to old Scrooge; Killian Vander Spiegel guards his treasure and guides his heir Dolph Heyliger to it); it may be a harbinger of doom (a Benshee), a mischievous goblin (the Heer of the Dunderberg) or a herald of upcoming perils (the Flying Dutchman); he may haunt a place or harass the guilty until justice is done. The ghost story informs, warns, excites the imagination, and entertains; the effect depends on belief or the suspension of disbelief.

This suspension of disbelief is subverted in many of the tales, thus undermining their effect. Despite the half-revelation of Brom Bones' trickery and the rumors regarding Ichabod Crane, the schoolmaster's adventure is promoted from the status of practical joke to that of a legend, through its re-telling (and the manner of it) and its being penned down; but the postscript demotes it with its mock morals and concluding remark: "Faith, sir', replied the story-teller, 'as to that matter, I don't believe one half of it myself'" (1088). This is echoed twice in *Tales of a Traveller*, in the Preface and in the epigraph to Part 1:

when I attempt to draw forth a fact, I cannot determine whether I have read, heard or dreamt it; and I am always at a loss to know how much to believe of my own stories. ("To the reader", 384)

*Cleanthes*: This is a monstrous lie.

*Tony*: I do confess it.

Do you think I'd tell you truths? (387)

Both remarks point to the fictitious nature of the texts, and set the tone: the narrator may not be reliable, but rather liable to tell tall tales. It is "a story telling and a story reading age" remarks Geoffrey Crayon (384), and

it is "a favourite evening pastime" at Bracebridge (60) and at the Baronet's Bachelor Hall, a tradition and a sport in which everyone contributes their own narrative: every guest of the Baronet has an anecdote to tell involving a parent, in an attempt to out-tell the previous narrator ("all the company seemed engrossed by the subject, and disposed to bring their relatives and ancestors upon the scene" [424]). All these narratives are presented as ghost stories, but the first ones in fact are contaminated by the cheery humor of the party and are rather comic, even jokes on the audience. The first narrator builds up the audience's expectations only to shatter them by saying (or pretending) he does not know the end. "The Adventure of My Aunt" turns out to be a mundane thief story; and the adventure of the bold dragoon is quite farcical. Down-to-earth comments (the ghost of the Duchess de Longueville warms itself by the fire, "for your ghosts, if ghost it really was, are apt to be cold" [399]), frequent interruptions and asides break the rhythm and effect.<sup>7</sup>

The remark of the "gentleman with the haunted head" marks a radical shift in tone in the collection of tales: "[he] observe[s], that the stories hitherto related had a rather burlesque tendency" (418) and proceeds to tell a grislier one: the incident is more serious, morbid even; the account is much more detailed and the protagonist more thoroughly defined as regards his psychology. Whereas the previous ones were conventional, typical backdrops (an isolated old chateau; a lonely house "with a murderer hanging in chains on a bleak height in full view" [406]; apartments precisely of the kind ghosts are fond of haunting [398]), the setting here is put to more efficient symbolical use to duplicate

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<sup>7</sup> If they fail as chilly ghost stories, these tales do make a few satirical points. In "The Adventure of My Uncle" as in "The Spectre Bridegroom" (*The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*), the author pokes fun at an aristocracy that can only be proud of its ancestry and talk about great feats of a bygone age but cannot live up to its title, and at their sycophantic court: the Baron Von Landshort ridiculously prides himself on perpetuating past rivalries and lives as a recluse; the Marquis has "many stories to tell of the prowess of his ancestors" and proudly displays a two handled sword "as a proof there had been giants in his family," which he can hardly wield (396).

"The Adventure of My Aunt" derides the hypocrisy of the widow and society's approval of her overacted grief: having nursed her husband to death, the widow "did all that a widow could do to honor his memory. She spared no expense in either the quantity or quality of her mourning weeds. . . . All the world extolled her conduct to the skies; and it was determined, that a woman who behaved so well to the memory of one husband, deserved soon to get another" (406).

Wolfgang's mental state and its evolution. It all happened "on a stormy night" in Paris, "in the tempestuous times of the Revolution," reminiscent of the storm that marks King Lear's succumbing to madness (Act 3, Scene 2). The fury of the elements fits the insane's mind, until he encounters an incarnation, a projection of his fancies: after his long wanderings in "an excited and sublimated state" (419), the storm abates as he is engrossed in and soothed by his contemplation of the mysterious stranger he takes home. With its "fantastic" furniture and its swarms of books (422), the apartment hints at the unreal nature of the events: Wolfgang lives as a recluse in a world of fiction and fancy, leaving his room only to haunt the deserted streets or libraries, where he reads up on morbid subjects. Death imagery prevails — he is "a literary goul" digging up the corpses of obscure books in "the catacombs of departed authors," "the charnel house of decayed literature" (419) — that not only characterizes Wolfgang and creates a gloomy atmosphere, but is also a clue to what really happens.

The story indeed is fantastic on the surface, but boils down to a rational explanation, which it is the reader's task to work out (by himself — no explicit clue is given as is the case in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"). As it is told, Wolfgang meets a lonely beautiful woman, takes her home, woos her, and finds her dead the next morning; a policeman recognizes her: she was beheaded the previous day! Wolfgang goes mad as he understands his love woos were a Faustian compact tying him to the fiend he believed was stalking him. This "evil genius or spirit seeking to ensnare him or ensure his perdition" (419) is in fact madness, which the German student was conscious was gaining on him.<sup>8</sup> Arrived in Paris at the height of the Terror, he was contaminated by the general folly, and "scenes of blood . . . shocked his sensitive nature" (419); this probably

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8 The idea of fiends or spirits harassing the character until he goes mad was developed by later authors as well. Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse" teases the murderer until he admits his crime, drives him crazy by constantly tempting him to act dangerously; "the devils of a guilty heart" assail "The Haunted Mind" at night and the narrator sees them lurking in the dark (Hawthorne, 202); Dickens' madman recalls how "large and dusky forms with sly and jeering faces crouched in the corner of the room, and bent over [his] bed at night, tempting [him] to madness" ("A Madman's Manuscript", 14-15); and Ishmael supposes that, during the night, "a chasm [opened] in [Ahab], from which forked flames and lightnings shot up, and accursed fiends beckoned him to leap down among them" (*Moby Dick*, Chapter 44, 174).

upset the fragile balance and may explain his going mad at this particular time. As he is wandering through the streets "in this excited and sublimated state" (420), he finds a woman's corpse, sees in it the embodiment of his dreams when he is in fact projecting his fantasies on it, and takes it home, all the while imagining it is alive.<sup>9</sup> This necrophiliac act is the final step into madness and appropriately marks the death of the sane mind. In the madhouse,<sup>10</sup> when he tells visitors his stories, Wolfgang reverses the chronology: he is at the same time acting under his erroneous conviction he was tricked by a fiend, and trying through this rearrangement of reality to rationalize and account for his acts, while keeping the horrible truth at a distance; so that the original delusion helps him in some way to come to terms with reality.<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, at a time when "everything [is said to be] under the sway of the 'Goddess of Reason'" (422), Wolfgang comes under that of the "Goddess of *Unreason*," is overpowered by his own thoughts, his obsessive reveries of an ideal woman. It is clearly stated, from the very beginning, that Wolfgang's mental faculties are "impaired," "his imagination diseased," that he indulges in fantasies and lives in "an ideal world of his own" (416); the allusion to Swedenborg at this point links ghosts, delusions and insanity together, and introduces (comforts?) Wolfgang's belief in "an evil genius or spirit" trying to ensnare him:<sup>12</sup> the belief in ghosts and evil spirits, in the fantastic, serves to conceal the morbid truth, disguising it as something perhaps more acceptable

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<sup>9</sup> He does make a slip of the tongue when, finding her dead the next morning, he remarks "she was a *corpse*" (423, italics mine), instead of "she was *dead*."

<sup>10</sup> This would be at Bicêtre, founded in 1656 along with its counterpart La Salpêtrière (they were men's and women's hospitals, respectively). People at that time could come in and see the insane; such visits were considered both entertaining and instructive. The London Bethlem hospital (Bedlam) was open to the public as well, and the narrator of Poe's "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" decides during his tour of France to visit a madhouse "about which [he] had heard much" (699).

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the melancholy Annette finds some comfort in her "partial insanity": "The very delusion in which the poor girl walks may be one of these mists kindly diffused by Providence over the regions of thought, when they become too fruitful of misery. The veil may gradually be raised which obscures the horizon of the mind, as she is enabled steadily and calmly to contemplate the sorrows at present hidden in mercy from her view" ("Annette Delarbre" – *Bracebridge Hall*, 260-61).

<sup>12</sup> A Swedish philosopher, Emmanuel Swedenborg (1678-1722) claimed he could contact spirits and that invisible angels and devils acted on the visible world.

because of an alien nature which eludes close examination of the more common but too unsettling phenomenon of madness.

The epilogue to the tale of the German student is more serious than the previous ones and asserts the truthfulness of the account (the old gentleman has it from the student himself); indeed, Geoffrey Crayon insists in the Preface on the authenticity of this and the next: whereas the origin and the exactness of the other tales are uncertain (they may have been dreams, or mixtures of confused memories), those of the German student and of the young Italian are founded on anecdotes, and the former has even been related by French and English writers.<sup>13</sup> Yet it is presented as an "Adventure," not as a "Story," and is thus somehow related to the other, more farcical tales, as the title rings like that of a legend, of which it retains the oral form and consequent unreliability: while the adventure is told by a stranger instead of the protagonist himself, the story of the young Italian is an autobiographical account, and its being written lends it authenticity, since the Baronet can produce the letter and the portrait as proofs<sup>14</sup> — but it requires a few thresholds, and first of all a definite shift back to reality.

The guests of the Baronet do not share Ichabod Crane's superstitious belief; though (or because) their narratives are more jokes

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<sup>13</sup> The inquisitive gentleman simply asks whether this is a fact, and everyone accepts it as such, whereas the previous "adventures" provoked ironic comments and rational explanations: "The Adventure of My Aunt" raises no question as to the actuality of the events since there is nothing fantastic to it; but the uncle might have mistaken the housekeeper for a ghost, and the grandfather, bold as he was, obviously also was a heavy drinker and a sleepwalker. The narrator's insistence on the authenticity of the tales of madness emphasizes their importance in the collection: it is in these tales he appears to be most interested in; the comic ghost stories were but a prelude, and may have been intended as counterpoints, to heighten the others' effect by means of contrast.

<sup>14</sup> In the same way, such pieces as "Dolph Heyliger," "Rip Van Winkle" and "Sleepy Hollow" are presented as taken "From the Mss of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker" ("The Haunted House" — *Bracebridge Hall*, 300), the persona Irving had invented to publish *A History of New York*, and whose authenticity he had established by having a column printed in the newspapers about his disappearance. This literary technique of providing material proof of authenticity is in a sense parodied by the twisted logic at the end of "The Bold Dragoon": "My grandfather related the marvellous scene he had witnessed, and the broken handles of the prostrate clothes press bore testimony to the fact. There was no contesting such evidence" (417); similarly, the story of the German student is accepted as true, regardless of his being in an asylum.



than ghost stories, their enjoyment in telling and listening to them depends on the prevailing good humour and cannot last long, so fragile are the bases they are built upon. A yawn thus dispels the somewhat forced and artificial cheery atmosphere: "The sound broke the charm; the ghosts took to flight as if it had been cock-crowing, and there was a universal move for bed" (424). From then on, the stories are all first person accounts, which heightens their effect: the narrator is not re-telling a story but giving an exact account of his own experience, thus reducing the distance between the audience and the facts related and enabling some sort of authentication and identification. The ultimate and most efficient step lets the insane character speak for himself in an autobiographical letter.

"The Adventure of the Mysterious Picture" serves as a first threshold; it poses the existence of the portrait and of its remarkable qualities. The setting is associated with that of the "adventures" only to be dismissed by the smile of someone who knows better than to be impressed by mere tales: "I could not but smile at its resemblance in style to those eventful apartments described in the tales of the supper table" (425). The narrator is characterized as a sensible being, apt at finding rational interpretations, whose reliability cannot be doubted; this makes for more effect: if he is so excited, then there must be something to it. The setting only acquires meaning through his fearful eyes: disturbed by the picture, his "infected imagination" in turn infects the room, whose furniture "beg[ins] to grow oppressive to [him]" (427). The nervous gentleman tries to reason himself but cannot soothe his now "diseased imagination" (427) and becomes as obsessed with the image as its painter was: he is frantically agitated, paces up and down, laughs, but can't "persuade [him]self that this [is] chimerical" (426). He is haunted by the picture, sees it everywhere, and decides to sleep downstairs, afraid to be the butt of the others' jokes if they see he has not slept well: "The idea of being hag-ridden by my own fancy all night, and then bantered on my haggard looks the next day was intolerable; but the very idea was sufficient to produce the effect, and to render me still more nervous" (427). The old gentleman's extreme nervousness thus appears to be due not so much to the picture as to his own imagination and reflections; unsettlingly horrible as it looks, the picture cannot be said to have any actual "baleful" influence; the narrator's nervousness only grows and

develops out of his own fear of ridicule and feeds on itself. As was the case with Wolfgang, the ghosts spring forth from the character's mind: it is not the picture that infects him, but he that infects himself and acts upon his own imagination; the horror comes not from outside but from within: "it [is] some horror of the mind" (426) which the old gentleman cannot account for and barely manages to escape from by tearing out of his bed and leaving his room. Despite his awareness of the workings of his uncontrollable anxiety (he knows the special power the picture is invested with is that which he attributes it, as is clear from the abundant use of such words as "illusion," "imagination," "fancy," "seem"), his attempt at reasoning fails, and it is precisely this very attempt that works him up into a frantic state of agitation: when he fears that he might "mak[e] a very spectre of [him]self" (428) by letting the portrait haunt him, the old gentleman is anxious not only that he may look tired from lack of sleep, but also that this self-induced anxiety might drive him crazy — he would then indeed be but a specter.

When the company burst out with laughter at his confession he had been affected by a mere picture, and at his frenzied protestations of calm, the Baronet intervenes to attest the actuality of the mysterious dismal influence, and gives an account of how the truly frightening portrait came into his possession. His narrative serves as a final threshold, revealing little but arousing the audience's curiosity regarding the young Italian artist with the strange mania. The most interesting element of the Baronet's testimony which the first person narrative could not feature is the description of Ottavio's symptomatic gesture and appearance, in striking detail:

A devouring melancholy preyed upon his heart, and seemed to be drying up the very blood in his veins. It was not a soft melancholy — the disease of the affections; but a parching withering agony. I could see at times that his mouth was dry and feverish; he panted rather than breathed; his eyes were bloodshot; his cheeks pale and livid; with now and then faint streaks of red athwart them — baleful gleams of the fire that was consuming his heart. As my arm was within his, I felt him press it at times with a convulsive motion to his side; his hands would clinch themselves involuntarily, and a kind of shudder would run through his frame. (435)

Such a description not only partakes in the characterization of a pathetic being, but also in the creation of the referential illusion necessary

for the tale to be effective, by means of a would be scientific tone and exactness. Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe often draw upon science to back their work; the former refers the reader in his prefaces and notes to medical journals and newspaper articles discussing similar phenomena; and the latter makes extensive use (for a time) of phrenology, both in his tales and reviews. The authors' aim, of course, is not to faithfully illustrate medical theories but to use science to make their stories more realistic, and there would be no point in reading them, a medical dictionary on hand, to track down symptoms; but such a precise description stands out since it is not as frequent in Irving's tales as it is in Poe's. The symptoms of Ottavio's illness are in fact a mixture of those of melancholia and monomania; Irving cannot be blamed for the confusion: psychiatry was in its early years, and scientists were constantly adapting their theories and classifications to their latest observations.<sup>15</sup> The point here is that Irving resorted to the same means as Brown and Poe did to root his fiction into reality. This is what makes tales of madness so unsettling: they are based on attested facts and often concern gentle people that unexpectedly go insane. Ghost stories remain legends, and one is in fact rarely confronted with spirits; but everyone can go and visit a madhouse, see the raving lunatic, the calm but dangerous murderer, the maniac, all persons they might have trusted or even known, and fear that they might some day join them — just as the old gentleman fears the

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<sup>15</sup> Quoting from various sources, Michel Foucault first notes that mania and melancholia were opposed. Patients suffering from melancholia had a dry tongue and dry eyes according to Dr James' *Medical Dictionary* (1743) (125). But then, mania was observed to be accompanied "by a general aridity in the entire organism" (127), and Dr Forestier showed "how an excessive loss of a humor, by drying out the vessels and fibers, may provoke a state of mania" (128). It was consequently agreed that "the world of melancholia was humid, heavy, and cold; that of mania was parched, dry, compounded of violence and fragility" (129). Physicians eventually concluded that mania and melancholia were linked and distinguished only by a difference in degree (133), one evolving into the other. Dr Prichard would add in 1833 that "attacks of maniacal disease . . . are almost always accompanied by symptoms of fever," a rapid pulse, and that "the conjunctiva is injected with blood."

The description of Ottavio thus combines several symptoms of two altered mental states. Irving apparently did not share Poe's interest in science (there is no systematic use of it as in Poe's tales), and may have used in his story fragments of theories he had heard or read about but did not bother check upon; even if he did, it is not surprising he would have been at a loss which theory to choose, since scientists offered so contradictory ones.

picture will drive him crazy: the specter of madness is that which most scares.

Now that the young Italian has been introduced and the audience's curiosity has been aroused by teaser stories, the depiction of madness can be carried several steps further than it had been in "The Adventure of the German Student," by means of a first person narrative that gives direct access to the insane character's mind. While the third person omniscient narrator allows Hawthorne to provide a reliable viewpoint and analysis of the characters and events, the first person fits Poe's horror stories better for it induced an uncomfortable forced proximity of the reader with the madman; the latter usually delivers his speech or writes his letter at the last moment of his life, to justify his acts and plead sanity, to provoke admiration through the display of his genius or sympathy ("I had nearly said . . . pity" ["William Wilson" 337]). The threefold telling of the young Italian's story combines the advantages of both narrative modes, the three parts forming a triptych: each story can stand on its own as a first person account (a firsthand experience of uncontrollable and unexplainable anxiety; a last moment confidence; though or because it raises more questions than it answers, the Baronet's story is like that of "The Stout Gentleman" told by the nervous narrator at Bracebridge), and sheds light on the other two (the first two introduce the third, provide material proofs of its authenticity; the second identifies the source of the artifacts considered in the other two; the last tells the events leading to the creation of the mysterious object considered in the first story and to the strange mania observed in the second); the three form a whole, each at the same time independent and dependent on the other two to make sense.

Inherent to this relation is that between ghost stories and stories of madness: of the ghost story the first account retains the Fantastic, while walking the line of (in)sanity (no matter the exact cause of his anxiety, it might have worked the old gentleman up into craziness — even if in a mild and temporary form — had his attention been kept longer absorbed by the picture); the Baronet's testimony acts as a transition between the two genres, taking the narrative out of the fantastic and ushering it into an open, more familiar environment in which simple explanations can be found to odd behaviors (the young man's "might be

caused by apprehension of arrest; or perhaps from dread of assassination" [434]); Ottavio's story eventually combines both genres: it may be read as a ghost story<sup>16</sup> or as the story of a man tormented by guilt to the point of insanity. In the latter case, both genres are intricately entwined as Ottavio's vision is another form of ghost: the spirit of conscience — a kin of Poe's William Wilson or the spirits in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and Hawthorne's "Fancy's Show Box." It is the projection, the expression of a split within the self, of the character's realization that he does not live up to the moral standard of his superego: he is constantly at war with himself, and this inner tension develops into madness, characterized by delusions. As he eventually finds out, the only escape is through death, a theme which pervades both art and imagery in the text;<sup>17</sup> in fact, Ottavio's degeneration consists in fact in an increasing alienation, a series of symbolical deaths.

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<sup>16</sup> The fact that only he can see the ghost is not in contradiction with this reading by implying it is a delusion: if it is possible that the spirit of the dead "materialize," then it may also make itself visible to the sole persons concerned.

<sup>17</sup> Ottavio's letter somewhat reads like the memoranda of one of Poe's characters, what with its abundance of morbid allusions ("the loathsome banquet of the beetle and the worm" [441]) and its opening statement (439): "I showed, when quite a child, an extreme sensibility. . . . I could be wrought upon to a wonderful degree of anguish or delight by the power of music. As I grew older my feelings remained equally acute, and I was easily transported to paroxysms of pleasure or rage. . . . I thus became a little creature of passion," which William Wilson's explanation almost echoes: "I am the descendant of a race whose imaginative and easily excited temperament has at all times rendered them remarkable; and in my earliest infancy I gave evidence of having fully inherited the family character. . . . I grew self-willed, addicted to the wildest caprices, and a prey to the most ungovernable passions"(388). The Baronet noted that Ottavio "was always powerfully agitated by music" (437), and the Italian artist repeats that he is "a creature of feeling and fancy" (442), "always prone to be carried away by gusts of the feelings" (458), but this trait has little to do with Ottavio's murder of Filippo (the latter's duplicity is reason enough) or with his remorse and insanity; it does however invest Ottavio with a special artistic skill as is the case with Roderick Usher, whose "very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in . . . a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties, of musical science" (318). At first ill directed (442), contaminated by the monks' gloom and fascination with the morbid, his imagination at first can only conceive "gloomy productions"; under the benevolent guidance of the painter, his extreme sensibility, which used to be a curse and a pain, turns into a happy gift, a source of great art and pleasure: "I always was a visionary imaginative being, but now all my reveries and imaginings all elevated me to rapture" (446).

Tired of the sensible being they liked to play cruel tricks upon, his family send him to the convent; it means the death of his social self and of his good nature as the austere life represses his gentle qualities and is to him a premature burial at a time "when the sensibilities are in all their bloom and freshness": the convent is "th[e] tomb of the living" (442-43), where "the agonies of death" and "all the stages of dissolution and decay" (441-42) seem to be the only concerns and imprint with melancholy the young mind that can only feed on itself and the little it can find in this dismal environment. Such imprisonment increases Ottavio's natural tendency to withdraw into himself, a condition propitious to, if not symptomatic of, the development of mania: even when he leaves the convent to reintegrate society, he remains apart from it, and is prompt to seize upon ideas and be seized by them to the point of obsession. Like Wolfgang, who lives as a recluse in a world of his own, Ottavio enjoys the solitary contemplation of "lofty and poetical ideas" (446); when he meets an expression of "*le beau idéal*" (447) he can only admire it from a distance, content himself with the image of it, which "dwell[s] in [his] imagination" and pervades his art: he lives in a "fond, melancholy, delirious dream" (448), a ghost world of fantasy. Just as a ghost exists but on the verge of life, contemplates the living but cannot mix with them, the maniac seems not to be able to live otherwise than in his dreamworld: it is when he is separated from her that his love for Bianca grows stronger ("My passion for Bianca gained daily more force from absence; by constant meditation it bore itself a deeper and deeper channel" [456]); and when he lives near her in the Palace he is not comfortable, cannot help feeling "like a guilty being," (451) scorned and rejected by the Count and Filippo, as he was by his own father. The consequence of such alienation is an even greater one, from his own self, or rather a rejection of the identity which has been imposed on him, of this self so different from his true nature that others have forced on him: it is through the action of his family that "[he] became a little creature of passion;" (439) melancholy was then "infused into [his] character" by the monks, who delighted to "work upon [his] ardent feelings and "gave [him] a tendency to superstition, which [he] could never effectually shake off;" (441) "in this dismal way was a creature of feeling and fancy brought up," by repressing "everything genial and amiable in [his] nature" (442). His identity denied by his father, his character altered by the monks, Ottavio

is made to experience the ultimate alienation: "strange even to [him]self" (444), he hates himself (442).

The revelation of Filippo's duplicity concludes the splitting process. The treachery of this friend who shattered his dream fills Ottavio with rage: as he kills him, he definitely severs himself from "the magnetic chain of humanity":<sup>18</sup> "I fled forth from the garden like another Cain, a hell within my bosom, and a curse upon my head" (literally: "the horrible phantom," this "curse that [clings] to [his] footsteps" is indeed a projection from his tormented mind gone insane [463]). The death of everything human in him is underlined by his assimilation to a savage beast: he foams, (461) attacks his prey then, with his poniard for claws, digs in the dead corpse, "with the blood thirsty feeling of a tiger," grasps him by the throat, and flees in the wilderness where he manages to survive in a daze, in a savage state (464).

With the awareness of his crime comes the death of reason: it is his curse that his remorse "settle[s] into a permanent malady of the mind" (463) in the form of a vivid vision that haunts him, the "horrible phantom" of Filippo's countenance locked in "the agony of intense bodily pain" (426). No amusement, no distraction can make him forget, not even for an instant: always "the thought of death" pursues him, always the phantom stares at him; it is "a never dying worm [that preys] upon [his] heart" (463): death has been internalized and Ottavio becomes a shadowy being, a ghost as it were, a "man of the crowd" that knows no joy, never mingles with others, always "hunt[ing] after bustle and amusement; yet never take[ing] any interest in either the business or gaiety of the scene." Instead of being condemned to spend eternity on earth haunting the garden at Sestri after his death, the young Italian is condemned to live such a ghostlike alienation all his lifetime, while the ghost of his crime haunts his mind.

Recalling perhaps the monk who had chosen the seclusion of the convent "in expiation of some crime" and made his morbid art "a source of penance to him" (441), Ottavio seeks relief in art, hoping to

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<sup>18</sup> "He had lost his hold of the magnetic chain of humanity. He was no longer a brother-man" (Hawthorne, "Ethan Brand" 1064).

exorcise the devil of his guilty heart (Hawthorne's "The Haunted Mind" 202) by projecting it on canvas and thus containing it, but he only exacerbates his evil by multiplying it. His autobiographical letter is his next try: whereas for Wolfgang, telling his story was a way of keeping truth at bay by rearranging it in the process of narrating, Ottavio's account is an attempt at exorcism through truth, by means of a cathartic self-analysis. It is in religion that he finally finds support, and his extreme sensibility is instrumental in his "salvation", as it enables him to hear a divine voice guide him toward the peace of his mind: "I heard a voice speaking to me from the midst of the music; I heard it rising above the pealing of the organ and the voices of the choir: it spoke to me in tones of celestial melody; it promised mercy and forgiveness, but demanded from me full expiation" (463-64). Escape for Ottavio lies in confession and death.

The epilogue ends on yet another trick, a joke at the expense of the party, whom the Baronet does not deem wise enough to see the actual portrait: "I saw that some of them were in a bantering vein, and I did not choose that the memento of the poor Italian should be made a jest of. So I gave the housekeeper a hint to show them all to a different chamber!" (464). Ottavio's letter is not a fantastic tale meant to entertain, but the account of an individual struggling with his conscience, sinking into madness and confessing his crime to find peace. Whereas some ghost stories may be laughable, no story of madness is, for they deal with man's utmost fears: death and the loss of reason.

Ghost stories no longer scare; reality does. While tales of spirits and monsters used to impress the audience, made them nervous and uneasy when going to sleep, such tales now merely are pretext to jokes and make people smile instead of checking under their beds. The monsters of old have been replaced by more familiar ones,<sup>19</sup> more terrifying precisely because of this uncanny mixture of familiarity and strangeness which characterize ghosts, but which they display at a higher

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<sup>19</sup> In both senses of the word "monster": inhuman because of the atrocity of their crimes and of their insensibility, the insane are social outcasts; abnormal because of their altered mental faculties and morality, they were displayed in freak shows, of which hospitals were the modern form.



degree. "[T]error is not of Germany, but of the soul," wrote Poe:<sup>20</sup> it is not a matter of setting, nor is any fantastic creature needed; the human mind "holds its hell within itself" (Hawthorne's "The Haunted Mind" 202), which reason guards, lest its worse ideas, its greatest fears, the ghosts that haunt it at night break loose and spring forth to replace reality and hurl it into madness.

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<sup>20</sup> Poe, Preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, 129.

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