



BRILL

# Poe and the Apocalyptic Sublime

## *“The Masque of the Red Death”*

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### Abstract

This essay examines “The Masque of the Red Death,” one of Poe’s most allusive tales, as a striking example of the aesthetics of the apocalyptic sublime. Combining several key ideas from Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* with numerous motifs from biblical apocalyptic symbolism, Poe’s “Masque” was specifically designed to create an effect of sublime terror in the reader. Basing his image of mass death on the cholera pandemic of 1832, which killed thousands of individuals in Europe and America, Poe created a historically grounded parable of apocalyptic extinction with a myriad of connections with literary, biblical, and artistic tradition. Poe’s tale echoes many of Burke’s remarks on the nature and sources of sublime and beautiful effects while conveying a biblically based vision of human mortality.

### Keywords

Burke – sublime – apocalyptic – cholera – beautiful – grotesque

The concept of the “apocalyptic sublime” was first set forth over three decades ago by the literary and cultural historian Martin Paley to describe a distinctive tradition in British art from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century found in works by West, de Louthembourg, Blake, Turner, Martin, Colman, and Danby. As Paley demonstrated, such artists depicted a variety of apocalyptic events and symbolism often taken from the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation while drawing heavily on ideas found in Edmund Burke’s influential 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Paley; see also Monk; Kirwan; and Shaw). Yet the idea of an apocalyptic sublime is also a potentially useful means for exploring many works of Romantic-era literature in both England and America; indeed, it is a key

paradigm for understanding some of the fiction and poetry of Poe, in whose works we may find the same combination of apocalyptic symbolism conjoined with a broad range of ideas from Burke's treatise (Cook). As one of Poe's most popular and widely interpreted tales of terror, "The Masque of the Red Death" is a prime example of this aesthetic paradigm and so provides fertile ground for exploring the related literary, religious, and artistic influences that inform many of the distinctive features of the tale.

In examining Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" as an example of the apocalyptic sublime, we must keep in mind the basic distinction that Burke makes between the painful and pleasurable aspects of the sublime, a term that in Burke's *Enquiry* is interpreted as a species of terror inspired by a variety of environmental and physiological causes. Thus, while the chief source of the sublime is the emotion of overwhelming fear, it is only when we are aware that this fear is not a lethal threat that we can experience the true aesthetic enjoyment, or what Burke calls the "delight," of the sublime. As Burke writes in his *Enquiry*, "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (39). On the other hand, "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience" (40). Physical or aesthetic distance is thus the key to experiencing the sublime as pleasure, as opposed to succumbing to its unmediated terrors in the form of traumatic pain. Although he only cites biblical examples of the sublime from the book of Job and the Psalms, the discussion of the subject in Burke's *Enquiry* could easily be applied to the characteristic emotions—terror, awe, despair—of the Christian end-time. Bearing in mind Poe's critical argument in "The Philosophy of Composition" and elsewhere that a unity of effect is necessary in the creation of a story or poem, I shall argue here that the intended unity of aesthetic effect of "The Masque of the Red Death" is the creation of sublime apocalyptic terror.

Borrowing elements from a wide variety of biblical and literary sources in addition to Burke's *Enquiry*, "The Masque of the Red Death" represents a striking example of Poe's depiction of the apocalyptic sublime. The story accordingly describes the retreat of Prince Prospero and a group of privileged "knights and dames" (670) of his court from the insidious onset of the "Red Death," a disease named after the profuse bleeding that characterizes its chief effect on its victim; such a hypothetical disease is seemingly more rapid and potent than such historic killers as bubonic plague, malaria, smallpox, yellow fever, typhus,

cholera, or tuberculosis. Devoted to pleasurable entertainments in their protected enclave, the prince and his followers attempt to elude the contagious disease that has decimated the population all around them, but the figure of the Red Death imperceptibly stalks into their presence to claim their lives. Poe's allegorical *memento mori*, with its grotesque imagery, depicts the inevitable arrival of this deadly disease within Prince Prospero's ostensibly invulnerable realm during a climactic masquerade ball, in a scene of ghastly apocalyptic sublimity in which the human race is destroyed, even as the tale's final extinction of human life renders the narrative point of view potentially problematic.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to its pervasive biblical allusions, Poe's allegorical evocation of the advent of a genocidal plague in "Masque" has a number of other significant biographical, historical, and literary sources that should be mentioned in order to appreciate the full artistry of its design. In its historical context, the evocation of the "Red Death" in Poe's tale combines aspects of two of the most dreaded nineteenth-century epidemic diseases, pulmonary tuberculosis and the Asiatic cholera. Biographers have noted that in mid-January 1842, four months before the publication of "Masque," Virginia Poe experienced a debilitating hemorrhage from the pulmonary tuberculosis that eventually killed her—an event that likely contributed to the sanguinary horror of Poe's 1842 tale.<sup>2</sup> Yet if pulmonary tuberculosis was characterized by recurrent and eventually lethal hemorrhages of blood, Asiatic cholera killed more rapidly and mysteriously, frequently transforming its victims into shriveled, discolored corpses within a few hours of infection. It is thus clear that, apart from the profuse bleeding that characterizes the "Red Death," many of the dramatic features of the plague in Poe's tale derive from cholera rather than tuberculosis.

Transmitted by a bacillus (*vibrio cholerae*) through contaminated water, cholera caused diarrhea, vomiting, fever, and death by dehydration; victims turned blue because of the cyanosis resulting from circulatory collapse and experienced severe muscular cramps and corrugated skin in advanced stages

1 For discussions of point of view in the story, see Cassuto; Dudley; Rosenblum; Fisher; and Magnuson. For a useful review of older criticism of the story, see Roppolo. On "Masque" and the grotesque, see Harpham, ch. 5. I have previously used the idea of the "apocalyptic sublime" in an analysis of "The Fall of the House of Usher"; see Cook.

2 Silverman 179–181; Hutchisson 135–140. As Hutchisson notes, "In 'The Masque of the Red Death,' Poe accepted the terminality of Virginia's illness, throwing out his earlier, hypothetical posturings about cheating death and reuniting with lost loved ones in another realm ... Virginia's 'drowning in blood' was the emotional impetus for the story, yet Poe likely also drew on his memory of the great cholera epidemic that swept through Baltimore in 1831 [*sic*]" (137). Hutchisson does not discuss the tale's association with the 1832 cholera pandemic.

of the disease. As the first global pandemic of the modern world, Asiatic cholera radiated out from the Bay of Bengal in India beginning in 1817, traveling through Persia, the Near East, Russia, and the Baltic until it arrived in England and France in 1831 and America in 1832. As a writer for the *London Quarterly Review* noted in 1832, “We have witnessed in our days the birth of a new pestilence, which, in the short space of fourteen years, has desolated the fairest portions of the globe, and swept off at least FIFTY MILLIONS of our race. It has mastered every variety of climate, surmounted every natural barrier, conquered every people” (“Cholera” 170). Cholera killed 32,000 in England in 1831–1832, and after crossing the Atlantic to Canada and the United States, it created a public health crisis in eastern cities in America in the summer of 1832, including Baltimore where Poe was then living and where it killed 853 residents. In New York, wealthier citizens fled the city en masse that July as the epidemic went on to kill 3,515 by the end of the summer. In both England and America, many of the clergy considered cholera a punishment for individual or collective sin, while the medical profession struggled to understand the unknown causes and transmission of the new pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

In his study *Plagues and Peoples*, historian William H. McNeill describes the dramatic effects of cholera infection:

The speed with which cholera killed was profoundly alarming, since perfectly healthy people could never feel safe from sudden death when the infection was anywhere near. In addition, the symptoms were peculiarly horrible: radical dehydration meant that a victim shrank into a wizened caricature of his former self within a few hours, while ruptured capillaries discolored the skin, turning it black and blue. The effect was to make mortality uniquely visible: patterns of bodily decay were exacerbated and accelerated, as in a time-lapse motion picture, to remind all who saw it of death’s ugly horror and utter inevitability.

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This grim evocation of the effects of Asiatic cholera corresponds to salient aspects of Poe’s fictive Red Death: “No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so

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3 For detailed treatments of the 1831–1832 cholera epidemic in England, see Morris; see also Durey. On the 1832 cholera in America, see Chambers, ch. 1–6; and Rosenberg, chs. 1–5. On the response to the 1832 cholera in New York City, see Burrows and Wallace 589–594. Poe would refer to the 1832 cholera epidemic in New York at the start of his 1845 story “The Sphinx,” a satire on the narrator’s mistaken magnification of a death’s head moth into a gigantic primordial monster; see Schenkel.

hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal—the redness and horror of blood” (670). The fatality of cholera and the hideousness of its effect on its victims described above closely matches this graphic evocation, while Poe’s use of the word “Avatar”—the incarnation of a Hindu god—implicitly suits the ultimate origins of the cholera in India. Like typical cholera victims, the victims of Poe’s Red Death experience the massive loss of a vital bodily fluid and have their skin grotesquely discolored, thereby providing a horrifying reminder that the individual was marked for death and beyond the pale of human sympathy. The Red Death is thus described as producing “sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men. And the whole seizure, progress and termination of the disease, were the incidents of half an hour” (670). And just as the Red Death invisibly penetrates into Prince Prospero’s protected domain, thereby causing panic in the revelers gathered there, Asiatic cholera, as McNeill notes, “seemed capable of penetrating any quarantine, of bypassing any man-made obstacle: it chose its victims erratically, mainly but not exclusively from the lower classes in European towns. It was, in short, both uniquely dreadful in itself and unparalleled in recent European experience. Reaction was correspondingly frantic and far-reaching.”<sup>4</sup>

In a poetic evocation of the devastating 1832 cholera epidemic in England, set in a graveyard for cholera victims in Sheffield, the journalist and poet James Montgomery called the disease the “blue pest” and went on to describe its relentless progress and ghastly effects in a manner remarkably like Poe’s evocation of the Red Death:

Far east the fiend begun  
 Its course; thence round the world pursued the sun,  
 The ghosts of millions followed at its back,  
 Whose desecrated graves betray’d their track.  
 On Albion’s shores unseen the invader stept;  
 Secret and swift through field and city swept;  
 At noon, at midnight, seized the weak, the strong,

4 261. Durey describes the presence of cholera in England in 1831–1832 in terms that similarly evoke the penetration of the Red Death into Prince Prospero’s domain: “Terror, panic, fear, alarm, fright and dread were all words used to described people’s reactions to the prospect and impact of cholera in 1832 ... Flight could take several forms: a physical departure from a threatened environment; a withdrawal into one’s own home (essentially a passive response); or a denial of the threat’s existence (the flight into unreality)” (154).

Asleep, awake, alone, amid the throng;  
 Kill'd like a murderer; fix'd its icy hold,  
 And wrung out life with agony of cold;  
 Nor stay'd its vengeance where it crush'd the prey,  
 But set a mark, like Cain's, upon their clay,  
 And this tremendous seal impress'd on all,—  
 "Bury me out of sight and out of call."<sup>5</sup>

The poet's personification of the deadly disease, its global spread, its secretive action, its murderous assault, its distinctive "mark" and "seal"—all these suggest an imaginative response to this new plague akin to that found in Poe's tale.

At the same time the cholera epidemic was arriving in America, the journalist N. P. Willis—later Poe's employer and supporter—published on 2 June 1832 a description of a Parisian masked ball commemorating the epidemic in one of a series of newspaper sketches for the *New York Mirror* written during Willis's European travels, later published as *Pencilings by the Way* in multiple editions beginning in 1835. As Willis observed in Letter XVI, the Parisians celebrated their ball in the midst of pestilence with their traditional gaiety, as the guests danced through the night while the cholera ravaged various districts of the city where it would kill 18,000 residents:

I was at a masque ball at the *Théâtre des Variétés*, a night or two since, at the celebration of the *Mi-Careme*, or half-lent. There were some two thousand people, I should think, in fancy dresses, most of them grotesque and satirical, and the ball was kept up till seven in the morning, with all the extravagant gayety, noise, and fun, with which the French people managed such matters. There was a *cholera-waltz*, and a *cholera-galopade*, and one man, immensely tall, dressed as a personification of the *Cholera* itself, with skeleton armor, bloodshot eyes, and other horrible appurtenances of a walking pestilence. It was the burden of all the jokes, and all the cries of the hawkers, and all the conversation; and yet, probably, nineteen out of twenty of those present lived in the quarters most ravaged by the disease, and many of them had seen it face to face, and knew perfectly its deadly character!<sup>6</sup>

5 337–338. Montgomery's poem is entitled "The Cholera Mount: Lines on the Burying-Place for Patients Who Died of Cholera Morbus; A Pleasant Eminence in Sheffield Park." It is partially quoted in Morris 213.

6 24. Campbell, *Mind of Poe* 177, first pointed out Willis's sketch as a likely source for Poe's tale.

The Parisian ball's "immensely tall" personification of cholera, with his "skeleton armor" and "bloodshot eyes," suggests a grotesque model for Poe's personification of the Red Death as a "tall and gaunt" figure, "shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave," with his vesture "dabbled in *blood*" and corpse-like masked face "besprinkled with the scarlet horror" (675). As in Willis's cholera ball, the waltzing of Prince Prospero's knights and ladies at their masked ball also dates the setting of Poe's tale to roughly the first third of the nineteenth century, when the waltz first became a popular dance throughout European society and courts.

In order to place Poe's "Masque" in its wider literary context, we should recall that gruesome depictions of plague had been part of the Gothic tradition since Charles Brockden Brown's evocation of the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia in *Arthur Mervyn* (1799). Mary Shelley's *Last Man* (1826), another potential source for Poe's tale, depicted the effects of a global plague that had destroyed the human race except for two characters based on the figures of Lord Byron and Percy Shelley. For his depiction of the intrusion of death into scenes of human festivity in "Masque," Poe additionally makes use of three literary versions of the same motif found in Shakespeare, De Quincey, and—in an act of self-plagiarism—Poe himself. Thus, Prince Prospero's outraged reaction to the intrusion of the grotesque figure of the Red Death in Poe's "Masque" likely draws on a similar scene of horror and outrage in Macbeth's vision of Banquo's ghost in Act III of Shakespeare's tragedy. Poe may have also borrowed elements from De Quincey's Gothic novella *Klosterheim*, which was set during the devastations of the Thirty Years' War in Germany and featured a climactic masquerade ball in which a mysterious intruder is revealed to his political enemy, the Landgrave, here assuming the role Poe assigned to Prince Prospero in his "Masque." Finally, Poe's "Masque" reconceptualizes and expands on his own brief 1835 sketch "Shadow—A Parable," a depiction of the intrusion of a formless "Shadow" into the revels of seven individuals in the midst of a plague. Set in the pagan Hellenistic world, this early vignette concludes with a sublimely obscure figure of death explicitly identifying itself as "Shadow" in ominous tones that remind the revelers of their departed friends.<sup>7</sup>

7 On "Masque" and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, see Pollin, *Discoveries* ch. 5. On "Masque" and *Macbeth*, see Chandran. On "Masque" and De Quincey's *Klosterheim*, see Snyder. On Poe's "Shadow," see Pollin, "Poe's 'Shadow.'" Tritt argues that "Masque" offers a number of linguistic and contextual similarities to Byron's evocation of the Duchess of Richmond's ball in Brussels on the night before the battle of Waterloo, as found in Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. For a discussion of other possible sources in Poe's tale, see Cary; see also Gerber.

“The Masque of the Red Death” was first published in the May 1842 *Graham’s* magazine along with the second half of Poe’s review of a new edition of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*. Robert Regan has shown that Poe’s most immediate sources for “Masque” were likely Hawthorne’s stories “Howe’s Masquerade” and “Lady Eleanor’s Mantle” from the four “Legends of the Province-House” in *Twice-Told Tales*; the first of these dramatizes a prophecy of the impending end to British power in North America, while the second describes the advent of a destructive plague to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Among critics who have noted the many biblical allusions in Poe’s “Masque,” Patrick Cheney traces the influence of both Shakespeare’s *Tempest* and the Bible on “Masque,” showing the similarity between Poe’s and Shakespeare’s central characters of Prospero as the creators of theatrical masques; as he notes, if “the mythic pattern of both *The Tempest* and the Bible depicts man’s victory over sin, death, and time, Poe’s mythic pattern depicts the triumph of these agents of destruction over man.”<sup>8</sup> Miriam J. Shillingsburg, on the other hand, focuses on allusions to the books of Daniel and Revelation, associating the apocalyptic motifs of Poe’s tale with the increasingly insular separation of Southern slaveholders from American democratic culture and the aura of doom this created—a conclusion for which there is little evidence in the tale and which vitiates the existential impact of Poe’s masquerade of mortality.<sup>9</sup>

In the following analysis, I shall examine the apocalyptic symbolism of Poe’s story in relation to his use of the Burkean sublime of terror, an association partly based on the historical precedent of the 1832 Asiatic cholera pandemic in Europe and America. Poe closely conjoins biblical apocalyptic motifs with Burkean images of sublimity, creating a secularized representation of the terror of the Christian end-time. The overall rationale for the presence of biblical allu-

8 32. In his discussion of the biblical symbolism of Poe’s story, Cheney focuses on a variety of parallels, including the inversion of the Pauline symbolism of baptism (Romans 6) in the final image of the “blood-bedewed halls” of the revelers; the symbolism of Poe’s motif of the “masque” in connection with the veil imagery associated with Moses in Exodus 34 and 2 Corinthians 3; the *carpe diem* theme of Ecclesiastes and the terminal revels of Poe’s masquers; the depiction of the empty “grave-cerements” of the Red Death as compared with John’s depiction of the resurrection of Christ and the raising of Lazarus from the dead; the image of the braziers with burning coals providing light for the seven rooms in Poe’s tale as compared to the burning coals before God’s altar in the Old Testament temple in Leviticus 16:12, or the seven lamps of fire burning before God’s throne in Revelation 4:5; and finally, the color symbolism of the seven rooms in Poe’s story in relation to the depiction of the palace of Ahasuerus in the Old Testament book of Esther.

9 For a more recent article that associates Poe’s story with his alleged fears of the fall of Southern slave culture, see Haspel. For older overviews of Poe’s familiarity with the Bible, see Forrest and Campbell, “Poe’s Knowledge.”



sion in “Masque” is the depiction of the horrific moment of Prince Prospero’s encounter with the figure of death in the form of personified plague, followed by the rapid annihilation of the despairing revelers in his sequestered domain. In keeping with this climactic aesthetic effect, we find both explicit and implicit allusions to a variety of biblical texts that provide an archetypal illustration of a final confrontation between Burkean exemplars of pleasure and pain, beauty and terror, festivity and mortality—oppositions that suggest concurrent use of contemporary Romantic theories of the grotesque. In accordance with the frequent pictorialism of Poe’s aesthetic, moreover, “Masque” creates a vivid tableau of mortal horror with suggestive correlations to the visual tradition of the Grim Reaper, the Dance of Death, and the Triumph of Death that helped shape the larger artistic traditions of the apocalyptic sublime.

Various aspects of Burke’s *Enquiry* enhance the apocalyptic effects of “The Masque of the Red Death.” While Poe draws on Burke’s discussion of the aesthetics of the beautiful for his depiction of some aspects of Prospero’s pleasure palace, a variety of sublime features begin and end the tale, climaxed by the horrifying advent of the Red Death. Thus the initial depiction of the abbey into which Prince Prospero “retires” with his thousand followers suggests a Gothic structure having the requisite elements of sublime grandiosity. As Burke had noted, “To the sublime in building, greatness of dimension seems requisite” (76). In keeping with this size requirement, the “extensive and magnificent structure” of Prince Prospero’s castellated abbey is surrounded with a “strong and lofty wall” with large iron gates, the bolts of which are welded shut with “massy hammers” to prevent anyone from entering or exiting (670–671).

Yet if the exterior walls of Prince Prospero’s realm are sublimely grand, the interior of the castellated abbey is largely designed for “all the appliances of pleasure” (671)—a radical transformation from the original monastic use of the building. Prince Prospero himself is a representative Romantic artist figure whose creativity is manifested in the carefully planned interior design of his abbey.<sup>10</sup> In keeping with the Prince’s attempt to create a protected realm of aesthetic and hedonistic enjoyment, the unique design of his public rooms

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10 On Prince Prospero as an artist figure, see Vanderbilt: “Objective nature outside having been ravaged by the plague, Poe’s hero will employ his taste and imagination to create a symbolic equivalent of nature’s elements—a combination which can transform earthly reality into the artist’s liberating vision of immortal beauty ... Poe is writing a fable of the imagination striving to control and transform the corrosive elements of nature and to gain, through immortal beauty, the artist’s triumph over death” (380, 382). For a view of Prince Prospero as attempting to wear a “mask of indifference” against the reality of death, see Wheat. For a suggestive discussion of the fluid intersection of art and reality in the story, see Freedman 135–144.

is described as a product of his “love of the *bizarre*” (671). Thus, unlike other palaces in which a suite of rooms is aligned to produce “a long and straight vista” (671)—a design of *enfilade* best known from the palace of Versailles—the rooms at Prince Prospero’s abbey are set off at irregular angles; for as the narrator notes, “The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite” (671). On a symbolic level, the “Gothic” windows here remind us of the story’s generic identity as Gothic fiction, while the winding design of the suite of rooms suggests the idea of the labyrinth; the fact that only one room was visible at a time also conveys a graphic suggestion of human blindness to the future.

The irregular design of these rooms and their furnishings ultimately suggest an aesthetics of the “grotesque” involving incongruous, contrasting elements of beauty and sublimity. For if the design and décor here potentially follow key requirements for Burke’s concept of beauty, they also violate those canons by their angularity and strong accentuation. The irregular design of Prince Prospero’s suite of rooms ostensibly conforms to Burke’s rejection of the traditional idea of “proportion” as a requirement of beauty. In his discussion of “Gradual Variation,” for example, Burke began by noting: “But as perfectly beautiful bodies are not composed of angular parts, so their parts never continue long in the same right line” (114). Under a later heading of “Variation,” he similarly wrote: “Another principal property of beautiful objects is, that the line of their parts is continuously varying its direction; but it varies it by a very insensible deviation, it never varies it so quickly as to surprise, or by the sharpness of its angle to cause any twitching or convulsion of the optic nerve” (155). Yet the winding design of the Prince’s suite of rooms, with a “sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect” (671), does in fact suggest a rapid variation causing surprise, in violation of Burke’s dictates on beauty, even as the resulting “novel effect” follows the latter’s claim that “[s]ome degree of novelty must be one of the materials in every instrument [i.e., influence] which works upon the mind; and curiosity blends itself more or less with all our passions” (31).

A similar grotesque effect, based on a strong contrast of beauty and sublimity, governs the coloring of the seven public rooms in Prince Prospero’s palace, a likely visual allegory of the stages of human life. These rooms are decorated with the same diversely beautiful colors as the stained glass windows illuminating the room, except the sublimely fearsome seventh room, with its blood-colored glass and funereal décor, “shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet

of the same material and hue" (672). Beginning in the east chamber, we thus find the seven rooms colored in blue, purple, green, orange, white, violet, and red—colors from the prismatic spectrum that have been randomized in order, in keeping with the irregular physical layout of the rooms. The visual effect of these hues is nevertheless in general accordance with Burkean notions of color. Thus, Burke wrote that the colors "which seem most appropriated to beauty, are the milder of every sort; light greens, soft blues; weak whites; pink reds; and violets" (117). Moreover, "if the colours be strong and vivid, they are always diversified, and the object is never of one strong colour; there are almost always such a number of them (as in variegated flowers) that the strength and glare of each is considerably abated" (117). Yet in Prince Prospero's suite of rooms, with their illumination coming through Gothic windows from an outside corridor, each chamber has a "brazier of fire that projected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illumined the room. And thus were produced a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances" (672). The first six of Prospero's rooms exhibit a potentially beautiful Burkean color scheme but possess a glaring intensity that heightens the "fantastic" atmosphere in the rooms. Burke had also asserted that "in buildings, when the highest degree of the sublime is intended, the materials and ornaments ought neither to be white, nor green, nor yellow, nor blue, nor of a pale red [pink], nor violet, nor spotted, but of sad and fuscous colors, as black, or brown, or deep purple, and the like" (82). The horrifying seventh room, with its combination of blood-red lighting and black furnishings, clearly suggests a terrifying visual effect of the sublime, even as the six other rooms are seemingly designed to induce a grotesquely intensified and variegated form of visual beauty.<sup>11</sup>

The suite of rooms in Prince Prospero's palace, then, eventuate in the red and black seventh chamber to the west, and it is here that the aesthetics of the sublime prevail, based, in addition to the room's funereal color scheme, on the "gigantic clock of ebony" (672) on the western wall—an example of the clock symbolism found elsewhere in Poe's fiction implying the chronological limits of

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11 There have been many attempts to account for the color symbolism of the rooms in Prospero's palace. Basing his argument on an investigation of the color theory of Poe's era, Zimmerman ("Puzzle") claims that the colors of the rooms should be associated with the stages of a human life span from prebirth to death; see also Bell. Du Plessis, on the other hand, argues that the scheme is deliberately chaotic: "What emerges from an attentive reading is that the author's desire to represent aesthetic chaos and disorder leads him to choose a fittingly aberrant color distribution. Poe does retain all the colors from the Newtonian prism, but he rearranges them out of sequence, as if to make sure none of them can blend harmoniously with those adjacent. A garish succession of tones and hues is thus created" (41).

human life (Weber; Pitcher; Eddings; Zimmerman, *Poe* 51–62, and “Prospero’s Clock-Architecture”). The acoustic effects of the Burkean sublime are evident in “Masque” in connection with the ebony clock found in the seventh room, whose striking of the hour provides a painful reminder of the temporal limits to human existence intruding on the pleasure-driven revelers. The narrator thus notes of the “gigantic clock” striking the hour:

when the minute-hand made the circuit of the face, and the hour was to be stricken, there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that, at each lapse of an hour, the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance, to hearken to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce ceased their evolutions; and there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company; and, while the chimes of the clock yet rang, it was observed that the giddiest grew pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation.

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The revelers thus react with fear and dread to the sound of the clock, the “brazen lungs” of which suggest the trumpet of the Last Judgment (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16), or the seven trumpets of woe in the book of Revelation (Rev. 8–11). It is clear that the crowd is momentarily stunned by the sublime sound of the clock; for as Burke had written: “Excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror” (82). Moreover, “In every thing sudden and unexpected, we are apt to start; that is, we have a perception of danger, and our nature rouses us to guard against it. It may be observed, that a single sound of some strength, though but of short duration, if repeated after intervals, has a grand effect. Few things are more awful than the striking of a great clock, when the silence of the night prevents the attention from being too much dissipated” (83). It is just such a “grand effect” that the ebony clock makes in Poe’s “Masque,” and it is dramatically appropriate that the figure of the Red Death first appears after the clock strikes midnight, the traditional time for the advent of evil curses, spells, and spirits in Gothic literary tradition.

As we have seen, then, the general plan of Prince Prospero’s abbey is an aesthetic universe in which a variety of visual effects play a role, most of them grounded in the systematic incongruity of the grotesque. The same general aesthetic effect governs the grand masquerade ball that Prince Prospero decides to give after five or six months of residency in the abbey. Since the Prince has abso-

lute, god-like rule over the design of his festivities, he alone is responsible for the appearance of the masqueraders: “He disregarded the *decora* of mere fashion. His plans were bold and fiery, and his conceptions glowed with barbaric lustre” (673). Prince Prospero clearly has grandiose ambitions for remaking the world according to his own imaginative designs. Indeed, the accentuated visual effects of the abbey seemingly mirror the possibly “mad” mind of their creator, whose taste for pageantry reflects the same quality in his namesake in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. The narrator thus notes of the elaborate ball that the prince has arranged: “There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust” (673). While the “beautiful” and “terrible” here have Burkean pedigree, the “wanton,” “*bizarre*,” and repulsive (inspiring “disgust”) belong to the realm of the grotesque, which shapes the masquerade’s phantom-like dreams: “To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. And these—the dreams—writhed in and about, taking hue from the rooms, and causing the wild music of the orchestra to seem as the echo of their steps” (673). The interior of the abbey is in effect a symbolic representation of the prince’s own turbulent creative mind, and the mind of humanity in general, with its “multitude of dreams” reflecting the color of the rooms and the sound of music. With the hourly tolling of the ebony clock in the seventh room, however, these dream phantoms suddenly become “stiff-frozen” (673), thereby hinting at the paralyzing power of the thought of death in the imagination of the creator—a power that will soon enter the abbey with the striking of the midnight hour.

As Burton R. Pollin has demonstrated, the obtrusively grotesque aspects of Prince Prospero’s masquerade ball reflect the well-known aesthetic credo of Victor Hugo’s preface to his play *Cromwell* (1827); indeed, the direct allusion to Hugo’s *Hernani* (1830) in Poe’s tale confirms the influence of the French Romantic poet on this aspect of the story (*Discoveries* 1–23). Hugo’s notion of the grotesque combined systematically opposed qualities such as comedy and tragedy, the sublime and the ridiculous, the ugly and the beautiful. As he noted in his famous preface to *Cromwell*, “The modern muse will realize that not everything in the world is beautiful, that the ugly exists beside the beautiful, the distorted along with the graceful, the grotesque as a counterbalance to the sublime, the evil with the good, shade with light. She will begin to do like nature, to mingle in her creations—without, however, fusing—shade and light, the grotesque and the sublime” (qtd. in Furst, 324n; see also 78–83).

A similarly incongruous blend of opposed qualities is evident in the staging of Prospero’s theatrical ball; for “it was his own guiding taste which had given character to the masqueraders. Be sure they were grotesque. There were much

glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm—much of what has been since seen in ‘*Hernani*’” (673). The concluding allusion here to Hugo’s controversial play, which caused a riot in the Paris theatre in which it opened, refers to the grotesque finale of the drama in which a spectral figure in a black domino (Don Ruy Gomez da Silva) by means of a trumpet blast stops short a masked ball celebrating the wedding of the hero and heroine, *Hernani* and Doña Sol, requiring the former’s immediate death by poison, in which his bride joins him. Such a bizarre, horrific, and precipitous climax of sudden death is comparable to the climax of Poe’s tale, with its swift annihilation of the Prince Prospero and all his guests at the stroke of midnight. Poe likely saw a performance of *Hernani* in Philadelphia in January 1842, not long before he wrote “The Masque of the Red Death,” and the narrator’s reference to the fact that Hugo’s play has been “since seen” by the public suggests an implicit allusion to the ten-year interval between the cholera epidemic of 1832 and Poe’s immersion in Hugo’s work in 1842, even as it renders problematic the narrative point of view required by the apocalyptic ending of the Poe’s “Masque.”

As we have seen, Poe’s use of contemporary aesthetic theories of the grotesque in “Masque” is consonant with the larger Burkean frame of its aesthetic structure in which Prospero and his thousand knights and ladies are confronted with the lethally sublime terror of Death, while the vicarious reader can enjoy the tale’s “delight.” In the juxtaposition of the revelers in Prince Prospero’s domain with the intrusive figure of the Red Death, we accordingly find a stark contrast between the ultimate aesthetic sources of pleasure and pain in the beautiful and sublime, as outlined by Burke’s treatise. The tale thus illustrates the prime Burkean idea that “[w]hen danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible” (40). The steadily increasing horror of death dominates the end of Poe’s tale, in keeping with Burke’s definition of sublime terror as “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling ... But as pain is stronger in its operation than pleasure, so death is in general a much more affecting idea than pain” (39–40). The arrival of the figure of the Red Death thus inspires Prince Prospero with a sense of pained outrage at the vivid reminder of mortality in their midst, and in reaction he ironically attempts to “kill” death with a dagger, only to expire in the process. In this supreme dramatic moment of Poe’s tale, we find a “throng of the revelers” attempting to seize “the mummer, whose tall figure stood erect and motionless within the shadow of the ebony clock” (676), only to discover that the grotesque figure is a phantom.

The final evocation of the Red Death as a figure combining both terror and obscurity conforms closely to Burke’s notion of the potent effects of “obscurity” in the creation of the sublime. In this section, Burke cites the indistinct notions

of “ghosts and goblins,” the deliberately hidden leadership of “despotic governments,” and the darkness of “heathen temples” (59) as examples of the amplifying power of obscurity on fear. His supreme example of such sublime obscurity, however, is Milton’s depiction of Death in Book II of *Paradise Lost*, lines 666–673, which immediately follows the poet’s depiction of Satan’s daughter Sin:

*The other shape [i.e., Death],  
If shape it might be called that shape had none  
Distinguishable, in member, joint, or limb;  
Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,  
For each seemed either; black he stood as night,  
Fierce as ten furies, terrible as hell;  
And shook a dreadful dart. What seemed his head  
The likeness of a kingly crown had on.*

qtd. in BURKE 59

As Burke remarks, “In this description, all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree” (59). Milton’s sublime image of Death, as cited by Burke, undoubtedly contributed to the final image of the Red Death in Poe’s story in that the latter figure mysteriously dissolves into nothingness in the hands of the revelers seeking to arrest the murderer of Prince Prospero; thus they “gasped in unutterable horror at finding the grave ceremonies and corpse-like mask which they handled with so violent a rudeness, untenanted by any tangible form.”<sup>12</sup>

After their horrified discovery that the figure of death is a mere vacancy, the inhabitants of the abbey all expire as the figure of Death triumphs: “And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all” (676–677). In this sublime finale, time is extinguished along with all human life, as an unholy trinity of Darkness, Decay, and Death holds eternal sway over Prospero’s now extinct realm. The last sentence of Poe’s tale is appropriately charged with both Burkean and biblical connotations. As Burke had exten-

12 676. On the metaphysical ambiguities of the presence of the Red Death both inside and outside Prince Prospero’s domain, see Roth. Freedman argues that the phantasmal nature of the figure of Red Death paradoxically implies the triumph of human art over death: “As mere mask, untenanted by tangible form, the Red Death, horrific envoy of the real, is at the same time the archetypal realization of the spiritual ideal of poetry and art” (144).

sively noted (143–149), an atmosphere of darkness and blackness is productive of sublime terror. The “illimitable” nature of death’s “dominion,” moreover, may remind us of Burke’s assertion of the sublime effects of the infinite: “Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime” (73). The last sentence of Poe’s tale conveys just such a fearsome yet pleasurable sense of sublime infinity.

So far we have explored the various Burkean influences at work in Poe’s “Masque.” Yet these influences are strategically conjoined to a number of biblical allusions which can be classified under three general headings which I shall call *punitive plague*, an expression of divine wrath first set forth in Exodus; the *shadow at the feast*, an image of the secret intrusion of death at the height of human festivity most notably represented in the book of Daniel; and *antichristian apocalyptic nemesis*, a dramatic paradigm adapted from Revelation and other examples of New Testament eschatology. In the following discussion, I shall draw on biblical allusions previously identified by critics while adding a few of my own, all in order to illustrate the larger patterns behind Poe’s dense biblical symbolism.

Poe’s story begins with an evocation of a plague that is unprecedented in its sanguinary horror:

The “Red Death” had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal—the redness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men.

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The mention of “scarlet stains” here evokes the biblical tradition of scarlet as the archetypal color of sin, as in the book of Isaiah: “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (1:18). At the start of Poe’s story, we are thus implicitly presented with the traditional notion of plague as divine punishment, as the victims of the “Red Death” are condemned to social ostracism thanks to the traditional melding of biblical images of blood and plague.

Based on events recounted in Exodus, plague has long been considered a form of divine punishment, for the original biblical plague was the series of afflictions commanded by God on the Egyptians (Exod. 7–12). During the third of these afflictions, for example, the Lord instructs Moses to tell his brother Aaron, rod in hand, to “stretch out thine hand upon the waters of Egypt, upon



their streams, upon their rivers, and upon their ponds, and upon all their pools of water, that they may become blood; and that there may be blood throughout all the land of Egypt" (Exod. 7:19). The book of Revelation strategically borrows this plague motif to attack the enemies of the Christian religion found in the empire and city of Rome, the latter now identified with the city of Babylon earlier denounced by the prophet Jeremiah. In Revelation, too, the series of trumpet judgments includes sanguinary punishments like those found in the Exodus, as when after the third trumpet, "the third part of the sea became blood" (Rev. 8:8). Later an angel of the Lord announces the fall of Babylon while another voice tells John: "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues" (Rev. 18:4). In Poe's tale, Prince Prospero and his followers are introduced as having fled the plague that has devastated the rest of the country, but unlike the redeemed Christians depicted in Revelation, they are symbolically associated with the doomed city of Babylon as represented in the books of Daniel and Revelation.

We should note that the identification of the red with the allegorical image of death in Poe's story also has an apocalyptic significance beyond the reference to the color of blood that is its "seal." In the book of Revelation, the red is associated with death on a massive scale, or with figures of monstrous evil having an appetite for blood. Thus, on the opening of the second seal, the second horseman of the Apocalypse rides a red horse, "and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another" (Rev. 6:4). Later, in Chapter 12, a monstrous red dragon threatens the pregnant woman clothed with the sun, ready "to devour her child as soon as it was born" (Rev. 12:4). And in Chapter 17, the scarlet woman on the scarlet-colored beast, better known as the Whore of Babylon, is "drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (Rev. 17:6).

In Poe's "Masque," red is so vivid a reminder of human mortality that few of Prince Prospero's knights and ladies have the moral stamina to remain in the seventh room of the suite of apartments, for "the effect of the fire-light that streamed upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted panes, was ghastly in the extreme, and produced so wild a look upon the countenances of those who entered, that there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within its precincts at all" (672). Moreover, as a figure in the general masquerade, the grotesque phantom of the Red Death might have been tolerated but for his tasteless exhibition of blood on both his face and cerements; thus "the figure in question had out-Heroded Herod, and gone beyond the bounds of even the prince's indefinite decorum. There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion" (675). In keeping with the subversive design of Poe's story, the allusion from *Hamlet* here implies a refer-

ence to Herod's slaughter of the innocents (Matt. 2:16–18), a hint of the coming sanguinary "slaughter" of Prince Prospero and his revelers.

The *shadow at the feast*, or the image of death intruding on human festivity, is the second dominant biblical motif in Poe's "Masque." The biblical prototype for all such scenes was the feast of Belshazzar in Chapter 5 of the book of Daniel, at which the hand of God imposes the mysterious "writing on the wall" announcing the imminent demise of his realm—a famous scene depicted in popular contemporary paintings by both Washington Allston and John Martin. In the well-known biblical story, the Babylonian king Belshazzar throws a great feast for a thousand of his followers, during which the "fingers of a man's hand" write a series of mysterious words on the plaster of a wall in the palace (Dan. 5:5). In response to the strange sign, the king sends for the Hebrew captive Daniel, who reads the prophetic writing on the wall to him foretelling the doom of the king (Dan. 5:27–29). That same night Belshazzar is slain as the Medes and Persians take over the Babylonian kingdom (Dan. 5:30–31).

Several important similarities unite Poe's tale with the well-known biblical account from Daniel. In both "Masque" and Daniel 5, both Prince Prospero and Belshazzar summon a thousand of their followers to an impious feast. In Daniel, "Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand" (Dan. 5:1); while in Poe's tale, "When his dominions were half depopulated, he [the Prince] summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys" (670). In Daniel, the Babylonians celebrate their feast using golden vessels taken from the sacked temple in Jerusalem and are thus condemned for their sacrilege. In Poe's story, Prospero's followers inhabit a former monastic abbey in which the main goal is self-indulgence, while the suite of apartments in Prince Prospero's abbey contains a "profusion of golden ornaments that lay scattered to and fro or depended from the roof" (672). So, too, the menacing but insubstantial supernatural figure of the Red Death in Poe's story is comparable to the representation of the disembodied divine hand writing the message of doom in the book of Daniel.

The third and final category of biblical allusion in Poe's "Masque" relates to the figure of the Red Death as an *antichristian apocalyptic nemesis* figure. The Red Death thus subversively mimics the eschatological role of the cosmic Christ coming to battle the armies of the damned at the Second Coming; yet if the cosmic Christ of the Apocalypse brings resurrection and redemption to the faithful, the Red Death in Poe's antichristian vision brings physical and spiritual annihilation to Prince Prospero and his revelers. In keeping with this general allegorical model, we find a number of key allusions in Poe's "Masque" to both

the book of Revelation and the “little apocalypse” of Matthew 24–25. The architecture of Prospero’s sanctuary is designed with this symbolism in mind, for the “abbey” is distinguished by its suite of seven variously colored rooms. Seven is, of course, the traditional cosmological number of completion found throughout the book of Revelation, as in the cycle of seven seals, trumpets, and vials of God’s wrath. The rooms of Prince Prospero’s abbey are, moreover, a colored microcosm of the world symbolically related to the seven days of creation and the seven decades of the biblically sanctioned span of human life, as enunciated in Psalm 90.

The intrusive figure of the Red Death in “Masque” is initially described in terms that are meant to evoke sublime horror as it subversively hints at the figure’s antichristian identity: “His vesture was dabbled in *blood*—and his broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror” (675). The description patently recalls the figure of the returning Christ as clothed with a “vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God” (Rev. 19:13). So, too, the blood on the Red Death’s forehead, together with the initial description of blood as its distinctive “seal” (670), both parody the “sealing” of the servants of God in Revelation 7:1–7. The “besprinkled” blood on the Red Death’s brow would also seem to make subversive allusion to the Hebrew deity, for in the book of Leviticus the altar of God is to be “sprinkled” with the blood of the sacrifice (Lev. 1:11; 3:8, 13). Finally, the Red Death is described as having entered the abbey “like a thief in the night” (676), an image associated with the unexpected advent of the cosmic Christ in Revelation 3:3 and 16:15, and repeated in 1 Thess. 5:52 and 1 Peter 3:10.

Another significant use of Revelation in Poe’s tale is its parodic adaptation of the image of the heavenly city of the New Jerusalem. Thus, the seven rooms of Prince Prospero’s palace have no source of light except for the braziers illuminating them from without:

Now in no one of the seven apartments was there any lamp or candelabrum, amid the profusion of golden ornaments that lay scattered to and fro or depended from the roof. There was no light of any kind emanating from lamp or candle within the suite of chambers. But in the corridors that followed the suite, there stood, opposite to each window, a heavy tripod, bearing a brazier of fire that projected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illumined the room.

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The means of illumination here may be compared with the lighting of the New Jerusalem: “there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light

of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 22:5). If Prince Prospero's realm thus aspires to the divine lighting of the heavenly city, it is not eternal life but rather eternal death that eventually reigns there, for the fires of the tripods "expired" when the Red Death has killed all the revelers, and darkness claims "dominion" over all. In the abbey's profusion of "golden ornaments that lay scattered to and fro or depended from the roof" (672), we also find an ironic resemblance to the heavenly city of Revelation, with its structures and streets of "pure gold" (Rev. 21:18, 21). In yet another ironic reversal, Prince Prospero has permanently sealed the massive iron gates of his protected realm from the outside world, while the gates of the New Jerusalem "shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there" (Rev. 21:25). Finally, in the holy city we find "a pure river of water of life" and a "tree of life" whose leaves are "for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:1-2); whereas in Prince Prospero's protected retreat, there is no "healing" of the nations but only immediate death.

Last of all, the representation of the figure of the Red Death in Prince Prospero's realm draws on passages from the "little apocalypse" found in the gospel of Matthew 24-25. In this section of Matthew, Christ announces the signs of the end-time and sets forth a number of parables illustrating the unexpected nature of His future return. Several of the latter warnings are directly relevant to the depiction of the unexpected advent of the Red Death in Poe's tale. Christ thus anticipates that His return will come at a time of "famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes" (Matt. 24:7). And just as Christ asserts of his return, "For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be" (Matt. 24:27), so the figure of the Red Death first appears in the "eastern or blue chamber" (675) of the abbey and then proceeds westward through the other colored chambers "with the same solemn and measured step which had distinguished him from the first" (676), ending up in the western "black apartment" where, after killing the attacking prince, it stands "erect and motionless within the shadow of the ebony clock" (676). By the same token, Poe's sketch provides a vivid contrast between the figure of Prince Prospero, who is indignant at the unanticipated intrusion of the ghastly scarlet-colored mummer into his festivities, and the biblical "faithful and wise servant" who is supposed to rule the Lord's "household" while the Lord is away.

Watch therefore; for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.  
 But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what  
 watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not  
 have suffered his house to be broken up.

Therefore, be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.

Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over this household, to give them meat in due season?

Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing.

Matt. 24:42–46

Contrary to the “goodman” in Christ’s parable, Prince Prospero does not know the hour in which his house will be “broken up,” although the tolling of the clock provides a recurrent preview of the advent of the annihilating Red Death. Moreover, Prince Prospero is hardly a “servant” of the Lord, even though he occupies a castellated “abbey,” for the prince exercises an absolute control over his decadent domain, while his subjects are engaged in continuous festivities designed to make them forget about the outside world and the state of their souls. As an apocalyptic nemesis figure, the Red Death reminds Prospero and his subjects of the final reality of physical annihilation, which they have attempted to exclude from their lives and thoughts.

The last sentence of Poe’s “Masque,” asserting that “Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all” (677), completes the tale’s series of biblical allusions, for the word “dominion” has significant resonances as a term for the universal power of God and Christ. In the book of Daniel, for example, the prophet sees the advent of “the Son of man” in a night vision: “And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:14). In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul claimed that because of Christ’s resurrection, “death hath no more dominion over him” (Rom. 6:9). And in Revelation, the seer claims that “to him [Christ] be glory and dominion for ever and ever” (Rev. 1:6). In Poe’s ironic reversal of such usage, the figure of Death usurps the “dominion” of the Christian God and the apocalyptic Christ, for there is only annihilation after the advent of the antichristian nemesis of the Red Death. As in Byron’s secularized apocalyptic poem “Darkness,” which may have influenced the ending of Poe’s story, the human race is destroyed within a seemingly godless entropic universe (Pollin, *Discoveries* 75–78; see also Zapf).

So far we have seen how Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” exhibits language and imagery suggestive of a literary representation of the Burkean and biblical apocalyptic sublime; we may conclude by noting that Poe’s tale can also be related to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century artistic rep-

representations of the same phenomenon. Morton Paley credits John Hamilton Mortimer's drawing of *Death on a Pale Horse*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1775, with initiating the tradition of the apocalyptic sublime in British art. In Mortimer's drawing, the emaciated body of Death, its skull bearing a crown, sits astride a white horse galloping over prostrate human figures with hellish creatures of prey hovering in the sky, all illustrating a text from Revelation 6:8. The Anglo-American painter Benjamin West (1738–1820) was a notable artistic practitioner of the apocalyptic sublime and an important developer of its iconography. His drawing of *The Triumph of Death* (1784) was the first of three versions of the motif of Death on a Pale Horse that he completed over the following two decades, a period of near continuous European warfare, during which violent graphic imagery of Revelation was particularly germane to the times. West's *Triumph of Death* formed part of a suite of related apocalyptic drawings and paintings that included *The Opening of the Seals* and *Death on the Pale Horse* (1796), the latter of which was purchased by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1836 and so was likely seen by Poe when he lived in Philadelphia (Cantalupo 9–10).

Washington Allston later wrote of West's huge canvas of *Death on a Pale Horse*: "No fancy could have better conceived and no pen more happily embodied visions of sublimity than he has in his inimitable picture from Revelation. Its subject is the opening of the seven seals, and a more sublime and awful picture I never beheld. It is impossible to conceive anything more terrible than Death on a white horse, and I am sure no painter has exceeded Mr. West in the fury, horror, and despair which he has represented in the surrounding figures" (qtd. in Paley 26). Although Poe probably had limited exposure to West's work—a native of the Philadelphia area, West moved to London for the rest of his life in 1763—we may view Poe's representation of the apocalyptic sublime in "The Masque of the Red Death" as an equally horrifying narrative counterpart to West's allegorical paintings, a tale in which Prince Prospero confronts Death with equal "fury, horror, and despair."

Yet in order to gain a fuller appreciation of the quasi-pictorial representation of Death in Poe's tale, we need to examine the larger allegorical tradition to which it belongs. In *The Gender of Death*, Karl S. Guthke has provided a rich schematic overview of the varying gender identities of the personification of Death in European art and literature since the Middle Ages. He divides his analysis into four phases: the medieval association of Adam and Eve with Death following St. Paul's well-known association in Romans 5–6 of sin and mortality; the conflation of Death and the devil in the Renaissance; the representation of Death as sympathetic "friend" or eroticized spouse in the Romantic era; and Death as a lethal temptress or stranger at a masked ball in the Decadent, Mod-

ernist, Postmodernist eras. In this broad panorama of death figures, Guthke only briefly mentions Poe's "Masque of the Red Death," but it is evident that the tale is a notably representative example of the final phase of the long tradition that Guthke examines. Moreover, as in much of his other short fiction, Poe's "Masque" has taken a subject of immediately topical interest—in this case, the recent cholera epidemic as a reminder of traditional divine plagues and mass deaths in human history—and, in its thematic richness and symbolic depth, given it universal appeal.<sup>13</sup>

Like many of his other tales and poems, Poe's "Masque" belongs to a tradition of literature and art devoted to the theme of *memento mori*, perhaps best known in the form of such medieval motifs as the Grim Reaper, the Dance of Death, and the Triumph of Death, all of which evolved from various biblical passages or Christian traditions concerning mortality (Goodwin, "Poe's 'Masque'"; *Kitsch and Culture*). Thus the image of the Grim Reaper, with his sickle and hourglass, was largely derived from Revelation: "And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to him that sat on the cloud, Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe. / And he that sat on the cloud thrust in his sickle on the earth; and the earth was reaped" (Rev. 14:15–16). The tradition of the Dance of Death, on the other hand, probably began as a morality play depicting the universality of death and quickly became a favored motif for visual artists, as seen, for example, in Hans Holbein the Younger's series of forty-one woodcuts on the theme, issued in 1538. Finally, the motif of the Triumph of Death originated in a poem of the same name by Petrarch (*Trionfa della Morte*). In later traditions of the visual arts, as in Pieter Bruegel's horrific 1562 version of the theme, the idea often became conflated with the motif of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, especially the well-known personification of death on a pale horse found in Revelation 6:8. The outbreak of bubonic plague in Europe 1348–1349, which killed about a third of its population, together with the devastating Hundred Years' War (1337–1453), made these three visual motifs on death all the more relevant in the late Middle Ages. Even in the nineteenth century such motifs were still pervasive, as seen in such adaptations as Thomas Row-

13 Guthke (246) suggests that Poe's tale has a source in Joseph von Eichendorff's novel *Pre-sentiment and Prospect* (*Ahnung unter Gegenwart*, 1815), in which the protagonist, while attending a ball at the prince's palace, meets a personification of death as a knight wearing a black mask; see also Mohr Zimmerman, in "Such as I Have Painted," recently argues that the main tradition of the visual arts reflected in "Masque" is the *vanitas* theme found in paintings of the Dutch Golden Age.

landson's aquatint series *The English Dance of Death* (1814–1816), Rembrandt Peale's painting *The Court of Death* (1820), and Gustave Doré's *The Vision of Death* from his engraved Bible illustrations (1866).

It is integral to the comprehensiveness of the theme of death in Poe's "Masque" that the motifs of the Grim Reaper, Dance of Death, and Triumph of Death can all be found illustrated in the tale. Like the traditional image of the Grim Reaper, for example, the figure of the Red Death literally cuts down the inhabitants of Prince Prospero's domain: "one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall" (676–677). So, too, the Grim Reaper's traditional hourglass, with its reminder of the temporal span of life, is displaced onto the image of the "gigantic clock of ebony" (672) in the seventh room. Moreover, like the image of the Dance of Death, the "spectral image" of the Red Death appears during a masked ball and "stalked to and fro among the waltzers" (675) before being ineffectually confronted by the outraged Prince Prospero. Finally, as in the literary and artistic traditions of the Triumph of Death, the figure of death in Poe's tale can claim a complete victory over the inhabitants of Prince Prospero's protected realm by the end of the story.

In its cumulative aesthetic and moral effects, then, Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" is heavily dependent on an aesthetic of the apocalyptic sublime. And while it also utilizes grotesque imagery depicting the ultimate triumph of death over human life dating from medieval traditions of the *memento mori*, the tale was partly formulated in reaction to the contemporary plague of cholera, reminding its nineteenth-century audience that mass mortality still stalked the land. By the same token, Poe's "Masque" offers an allegorical depiction of the general human condition in its quest for pleasure and avoidance of pain—especially the paralyzing fear of its own mortality—and the artistic imagination that seeks to transcend the limits of mortality through the idealized re-creation of reality. Using a scenario of doomed disaster survivors that would later become common in modern science fiction, Poe's tale offers a secularized enactment of apocalyptic terror and universal annihilation that is seemingly timeless in its message, yet firmly rooted in the historical, literary, and artistic circumstances of Poe's own era.



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