



AMERICANA

E-JOURNAL OF AMERICAN STUDIES IN HUNGARY

Volume VI, Number 2, Fall 2010

"The use of nature in American Gothic" by Tomasz Sawczuk

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When thinking about nature as a tool used by the masters of American Gothic, it seems impossible not to mention at least two things. The first one is the impact of their British forerunners and counterparts. The second appears to be even more crucial as it is said to stand behind the entirety of American Gothic, or even Gothic as a whole, and this is the reference to the ideas of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. The aim of the following work is to analyze the philosophical grounds of American Gothic and to illustrate various functions of nature in this particular literary genre exploited by American writers.

The roots of regarding nature as a literary instrument in gothic compositions can be sought in the year 1757, when Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* is published. In this essay on aesthetics, the British philosopher presents concepts which were to leave a great mark on all horror fiction in America. In his work Burke acknowledges himself as a debtor of the ancient thinker – Pseudo-Longinus – and his concept of the sublime. He decides to go back to this term and rediscovers that aesthetics do not have to be associated only with beauty but also with something “other”; a kind of terror to be appreciated. Nature is connected not solely with splendor – it is combined with certain types of emotions evoked by the sublime. Most notably Burke writes about *astonishment*, which “is that state of soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (1999: 64). *Fear* and *terror* are another passion labeled as sublime by Burke. The former is described as “an apprehension of pain or death” which “operates in a manner that resembles actual pain” (1999: 64). The latter is the one followed by fear and “the ruling principle of the sublime” (1999: 64). What is important for Burke, is that the sublime remains outside of a human being; it is situated in nature. Moreover, it cannot invade the mind – it has to be agreed on. Also, particular constituents of nature make it equipped with the power of terror. Burke writes about fauna:

There are many animals, who though far from being large, are yet capable of raising ideas of the sublime, because they are considered as objects of terror. As serpents and poisonous animals of almost all kinds. And to things of great dimensions, if we annex an adventitious idea of terror, they become without comparison greater (1999: 64).

The second key element which makes nature terrifying, is obscurity. Its essence is described in a few sentences:

When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Everyone will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings. Those despotic governments, which are founded on the passions of men, and principally upon the passion of fear, keep their chief as much as may be from the public eye (Burke 1999: 65).

Burke recognizes the supremacy of the darkness and murkiness over lightness and clearness when it comes to evoking sublime feelings by means of nature. He states that “(...) dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions, than those have which are more clear and determinate” (1999: 68). On the basis of these words it could also be surmised that what really counts for nature as a tool in American Gothic is its incompleteness and *infinity*. The latter term, together with *eternity*, is mentioned in the text when Burke feels amazed by the fact that these notions are second to none when it comes to affection but simultaneously they are the least explored and known fields (1999: 67). What seems to remain in close connection with them is the power of *dimension*. The philosopher suggests ways of its occurrence – each being distinguishingly qualitative in its capability of evoking passions. He proposes the depth as the most powerful, followed subsequently by height and length (1999: 74).

The ideas of Burke constituted a kind of stimulus for Horace Walpole who responded to the philosophy of the sublime, created Gothic as such, and created the literary ground for his followers. Again, with regard to nature, the interest in the sublime started to be common and manifested itself also through gardening and its theories. The concept of the English garden, with all its width, unkemptness and asymmetry was not without importance.

Depicting Burke’s sublime in connection with nature, Bryan Wolf labels it as a transgressive one, which “viewed nature as a punishing father and then transformed that punishment into a spectacle that could be safely viewed – and enjoyed – from a distance” (1986: 155). He juxtaposes it with what was to come – the sublime perceived by Kant. The German philosopher in his notable work, *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), changes the focus of the sublime – “from nature as an external power to the *observer* within nature” (Wolf 1986: 155). According to Kant, nature is “(...) called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to a presentation of those cases in which the mind can make itself sensible of the

appropriate sublimity of the sphere of its own being, even above nature” (2004). Now, it is the spectator and his mind that recognize nature as sublime or not. As Wolf puts it, to do it “was not simply to witness the elements in all their grandeur but to appropriate that grandeur as a *metaphor* for consciousness”. Kant makes a condition for appreciating the sublimity of nature – one has to be capable of making an aesthetic judgement as such. He also makes an important statement that nature indeed is powerful, but the human mind is omnipotent and can resist the fear it invokes. Wolf describes what the nineteenth-century sublime was all about after introduction of Kant’s philosophy, and what it meant for the Americans: “(...) an astonishing capacity of mind, an ability to consume the world as nothing more than a plenum of nutrients in that characteristically American project of self-making” (1986: 155). As it is further stated, the language and its ability to capture and define things was the engine contributing pricelessly to this project. Summing up, nature became simply “nothing more than a vehicle for the individual thoughts” (Wolf 1986: 146).

The space of many years has proved that the masters of American Gothic have possessed the ability to employ nature for various literary purposes and have exercised it in a brilliant way. Some ideas standing behind nature as a tool in gothic fiction were less common, some were noticeable in a great number of works. One of the most exploited ways of utilizing nature in Gothic was treating it as a kind of supplement for the real source of terror or simply a setting. Among a number of elements which enhance the power of affecting a reader’s mind, Nathaniel Drake, in his *On Objects of Terror*, necessitates the introduction of “picturesque description, or sublime and pathetic sentiment” (2000: 160). The very first authors of horror literature in America knew this very well. Firstly, let us consider Charles Brockden Brown and nature as a complement in *Somnambulism*. The focal source of terror is a human being – Alothorpe – a sleepwalker, whose affection for Constantia Davis throws him into madness and persecution of his beloved during sleep. The journey which lasts through the most part of the story is set in terrifying wilderness during the cold, dark night. The Burkean obscurity comes into play – characters do not feel sure, and cannot see clearly who precisely troubles them. The darkness works on behalf of Alothorpe – it is his ally that supplements the fear evoked by him, provides him with a shelter and

facilitates his actions. Moreover, it is the accomplice of his misdeeds and the pretext which stands behind his shadowing. Althoughterpe speaks: “A journey in darkness is not unaccompanied with peril. (...) there is danger, from which, I am persuaded, my attendance would be a sufficient, an indispensable safeguard. [...] It was easy to enumerate and magnify possibilities; that a tree or ridge, or stone unobserved might overturn the carriage (...) were far from being impossible” (1987: 7-8). Also, the darkness and obstructions accompany the characters of Richard Henry Dana’s *Paul Felton*. Paul and Abel travel in tiring gloom. The frenzy of their minds is only fanned by horrid weather: “Day broke before they cleared the ridge; a drizzling rain come on; and the wind, beginning to rise, drove through the clefts in the rocks, with sharp, whistling sounds, which seemed to come from malignant spirits of the air” (1850: 335). In *The Fall of the House of Usher* Edgar Allan Poe equips the decrepitude and decay of the mansion with a proper surrounding – “a few rank sedges – and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees” to achieve the coherence of the landscape and building’s condition. In addition, nature and the weather feed the tension and supplement the final disaster at the end of the story – the angry storm is raging and a whirlwind brings about the fall of the house, with a blood-red moon shining upon (1997). The last example, also worth mentioning, is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Young Goodman Brown* where nature plays a role very akin to its counterpart in Brown’s *Somnambulism*. The main character’s journey is also set in the wilderness during the nightfall; the road leads through “all the gloomiest trees of the forest” (1937: 1034). Again, the landscape serves as a refuge for the person of the devil, and makes the forest a kind of Venetian window thanks to which evil can watch every step of any human being. Besides, the trees hide other wicked beings – the Indians, being even described as “devilish” (1937: 1034).

Having in mind Burke’s thoughts concerning the sublime in nature, it cannot be forgotten that nature could always constitute a great source of terror itself. The traces of nature as a stimulus of fear can be spotted in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*. Burke spoke about dark and confused images distorting calmness and order. In *Edgar Huntly* the narrator, who is the main character, sees no images at all – he is overwhelmed by total darkness. It can only have a detrimental effect on Edgar as, being

trapped in a dark cave, he speaks: “Famine, and blindness, and death, and savage enemies, never fail to be conjured up by the silence and darkness of the night” (1984: 158). Finding himself in, so to say, an anti-Lockian situation where his senses either cannot be used or are useless, the gloom deprives him of any faith; paralyzes and sucks all the energy out of him as he recalls: “The darkness disabled me from comparing directions and distances.[...] Overpowered by my fears and my agonies I desisted from my fruitless search, and sat down, supporting my back against the wall” (1984: 161). *Edgar Huntly* carries one more important notion of nature as an oppressor and this is (also mentioned by Burke) the appearance of a fierce animal, that is a panther. The narrator speaks of its eyes as of “a fixed and obscure flame, (...) motionless” . His position seems to be the inferior one” “Thus had I struggled to obtain a post where a savage was lurking, and waited only till my efforts should place me within reach of his fangs” (1984: 166). However, following what Kant has mentioned about the power of humans, Edgar restores the presence of his mind in time and having overcome the fear, kills the beast. He proves the idea of human superiority over nature. Other characters who are driven to madness by nature are those of Dana’s *Paul Felton*. The narrator describes the weather just before the character enters the woods: “(...) a drizzling rain came on; and the wind, beginning to rise, drove through the clefts in the rocks, with sharp, whistling sounds, which seemed to come from malignant spirits of the air” (1850: 335). When the storm breaks out and the tree branches start to hit each other as if in a kind of fight, “as if there were life and passion in them”, frenzy seems to overcome the mind of Abel. The narrator speaks: “The terror of these sights and sounds was too much for poor Abel; it nearly crazed him; and he set up a shriek that pierced through the noises of the storm. (...) the boy’s face was a ghostly whiteness (1850: 336). Dana’s description of this scene has a number of comparisons to humans and uses personifications as if to suggest that nature is a malevolent, hidden person which is yet palpable. This is also reflected in the moment when Paul reaches the house:

(...) there was that stillness round, which, in the country, sometimes pervades nature like a diffused spiritual presence. Paul felt as if the brightness and quiet betrayed him. Everything he passed by seemed to have a knowledge of him, and strange eyes were on him. He hardly dared look round (1850: 344-345).

Even though it is bright and shiny, Paul dreads doing anything as he senses something supernatural around him.

Ever since literature has existed, one of the roles nature has been performing, is this of representing. Although speaking about a painting, Thomas Cole's *St. John in the Wilderness* to be more precise, Bryan Wolf makes a very important point about nature, which can be applied to literary purposes as well. Speaking about the trees which make a cross in the painting, he states that they:

possess no semiotic significance; they remain natural objects in a mute world. Cole's trees display no intrinsic meaning until they are marshaled in the service of a symbolic system. Wood remains wood until its rearrangement serves larger linguistic ends, until it becomes a *cross*, a sign in a larger signifying system (...). Through language, nature is rendered the servant of forces larger than itself (1986: 158).

American Gothic writers seem to employ this pattern frequently in view of putting meaning on nature, and communicating with the reader by transferring some general ideas. The works are often equipped with recurrent elements of the landscape just like in *Somnambulism*. The large oak which is mentioned several times appears to create some level of anxiety in the reader. The characters are warned about it; it serves as an omen of a terrible event that is going to take place. Eventually, it becomes the cause of an accident which is a kind of "beginning of the end" in *Somnambulism*. Also, this story is one among many others which utilize the motif of the woods as something accursed. The characters waver when they are to enter the wilderness intuiting that something bad will happen. The same is in *Paul Felton* – entering the woods is like crossing the border of what is forbidden; stepping into madness. Nature somehow reflects Paul's and Abel's states of mind all the time – the trees are tossing in agony when the characters feel agitated. Later, when Paul quits the hut and his suffering is over, the storm passes over and what can be seen are "the myriads of silver rain-drops, falling, or quivering on the leaves" – just as if the weather was also tired with torments" (1850: 341). Another masterpiece where the woods play the key role, is *Young Goodman Brown*. Brown goes into the forest as if he was entering hell – he leaves his

beloved Faith, the Puritan community, and enters into the obscure and unknown. What is more, he meets the devil himself there, and witnesses a black mess in the nearly inaccessible part of it. This remains in close connection with the words of Burke mentioning that "(...) all the heathen temples were dark" and speaking about the Druids who "performed all their ceremonies in the bosom of the darkest woods, and in the shade of the oldest and most spreading oaks" (1999: 65). With regard to Hawthorne's interests in the problem of tradition and attitudes towards the past, the journey into the woods could also symbolize a fearful step into the future, and a question whether the Puritan community – the past – should be forgotten. The ambiguity of meaning only illustrates how complex this problem is.

Finally, nature in American Gothic owes Kant's philosophy one more fundamental favour – it is the reflection of individual consciousness and an insight into the mind – a haunted one. Therefore, all the dread associated with nature and experienced by literary characters constitutes a pass to human mentality; it provokes us, helps us understand characteristically American self-making, but, first and foremost, it gives us a fright. In this respect, writers could create more emotionally-unstable heroes and enhance their verisimilitude by exploiting the field of subjectivity. Alothorpe of *Somnambulism* is a perfect example – finding himself in dangerous enchantment, he fights an internal struggle; he seems to have a split-personality and is dangerous from the inside. Being aware that the risk of a hazardous journey of his beloved and her father is marginal, he is still capable of enumerating a myriad of reasons for joining them. On one hand, he sees nature as safe, on the other, it is dangerous for him. A masterful grip of the human mind's nature in correlation with the landscape is also present in Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* where the narrator makes a sad but true conclusion that "while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth" (1997). The atmosphere of the story is gloomy because he perceives and presents his vision of the landscape to the reader in such a way. There seems to be no other possibility – the somberness of his spirit is "insufferable ; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate and terrible" (1997). By this means the mood of

the story is a perfect ground for the Gothic. We have to depend solely on the narrator, and his emotions are subject to the laws of nature, although, he admits that “a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression (...)” (1997).

To sum up, what can be inferred from analyzed works, is that there is a great variety of perspectives which can be applied to the insight into the use of nature in American Gothic masterpieces. Nature seems to permeate the matter of all the mentioned stories with sets of dualities – it can aid in inspiring fear, or spread terror itself; it may haunt from the outside as well as from the inside; it works as a simple element of described world, or as a symbol of higher meaning. Therefore, American horror stories are brilliantly diversified by its presence.

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