

Miasma in the House of Memory: Idealism, Contagion, and the Making of the Gothic Self

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Abstract

This article argues that a number of the most prominent Gothic spaces in American Romanticism were influenced by a Renaissance conception of medicine. I show how Romantic writers in the United States retained key elements of a miasmal model of disease, applying them to narratives in which Gothic architectural space and cognitive interiority become radically blurred. In the first section, I provide a detailed genealogy of miasma, charting the moral universe of the ancients and the development of rational medicine so as to understand Marsilio Ficino's conception of miasma as an invasive foreign agent that transmits itself through the scale of nature to jeopardize the spiritual coherence of the self. The second section applies this notion of miasma as a thematic literary context to the United States of the nineteenth century, briefly to Ralph Waldo Emerson and more assiduously to four representative texts: Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842), "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "Ligeia" (1838), and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). I conclude with the modernist afterlife of this miasmal paradigm in William Faulkner's Gothic masterpiece, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). In this, I examine the cultural power that an idealist way of thinking about human health continued to possess well into modernity.

Keywords

medicine, miasma, idealism, Romanticism, transcendentalism, modernism, architecture

This article argues that a number of the most prominent Gothic spaces in American Romanticism were influenced by a Renaissance conception of medicine. In his 1481 plague treatise, Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) offered an esoterically-inspired methodology to direct the human being toward self-transformation and immunity from disease. Ficino drew upon the medical tradition of Hippocrates and Galen, with its miasmatic epidemiology of earth poisons and predispositions to illness, but departed from standard medical thought by explicitly situating the contagion in the context of the Platonic heritage, namely, in the fundamental alignment or misalignment between the intelligible and sensible dimensions. Ficino at once argues for self-transformation as a prescription for immunity and warns that the Black Death is “a particular poison working against the vital spirit,” capable of appropriating the interlinking chain leading up from the depths of nature to invade the very essence of the human self (Katinis 75).

The American Romantics retained key elements of this medical model. With their depictions of miasma, authors like Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne preserve the older idealist paradigm, even while radically blurring Gothic architectural space and the cognitive interiority of their characters. Whereas a number of contemporary scholars have understood this vexed constitution of interiority to be a subversion of idealism, I make the case that the miasmatic dilemma that the Romantics engaged creatively reconstitutes the idealist heritage in terms of modern subjecthood. Indeed, the belief in the depths of the self and the simultaneous fear that these depths are materially fragile and highly susceptible to some form of sickness are part of an idealist paradigm about human health and disease inherited from the Renaissance. Since this interpretation is not at all obvious and, indeed, has never been explored in this way, I first articulate a detailed genealogy of miasma. In the first section, I begin with the moral universe of the ancients, proceed to chart the development of rational medicine, and then consider Ficino’s conception of miasma as an invasive foreign agent that transmits itself through the material world to jeopardize the spiritual coherence of the self. The second section applies miasma as a philosophico-medical trope to the United States of the nineteenth century, briefly to Ralph Waldo Emerson and more assiduously to four representative texts: Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842), “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), “Ligeia” (1838), and Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). I conclude with the modernist afterlife of this miasmatic paradigm in William Faulkner’s Gothic masterpiece, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). In this, I examine the cultural power that an idealist way of thinking about human health continued to possess well into modernity.

Miasma: Ancient and Early Modern

First proposed by Girolamo Fracastoro (1478-1553), the germ theory of disease was not widely embraced until the late nineteenth century, ushered in by physicians and scientists like John Snow (1813-58), Jacob Henle (1809-85), Louis Pasteur (1822-95), and Robert Koch (1843-1910). For millennia, the miasma theory of disease held sway, formulated initially as a medical explanation by the Greek physician Hippocrates (460-375 BCE) and his followers who defined it in the following way: “Fumes that originate from organic substances and which, spreading through the air and attaching themselves to certain bodies, exercise a pernicious influence on animals” (Jouanna 121). Miasma was not originally a medical term, however: “Derived from the verb *miaino*, which means to ‘stain’ (for example with purple, and hence, by analogy, with blood), the noun *miasma* is first found in connection with the stain of blood spilt in a crime” (121). From its earliest usage, therefore, miasma was inexorably connected with moral action: “the Hippocratic doctor, in seeing ‘impurity’ as a cause and symptom of disease, is an heir to the prophet or oracle” (Parker 2).

In its earliest forms, miasma was not expressly associated with bad air, although there are affinities between the earlier belief and the later Hippocratic medical model. Miasma in ancient Greek is part of the *mia-* word group and “is applied to a diverse range of things,” the “basic sense” related to “defilement” and “the impairment of a thing’s form or integrity.” Where “the verb *miaino* is more freely applied,” the “noun *miasma* or the adjective *miaros*” (Parker 3) refers to a condition with the following features: “it makes the person affected ritually impure, and thus unfit to enter a temple: it is contagious: it is dangerous, and this danger is not of familiar secular origin.” Importantly, the two main sources for this pollution “are contact with a corpse or a murderer” (4). Here, we can note a subtle connection with the later medical term where decay of a dead body threatens contagious disease, the later assumption being that the air is the medium through which such pollution passes. There is an ambiguity in this earlier notion of miasma, however, which involves whether this contagion is a foreign substance possessing a mysterious quasi-agency of its own—a supernatural forerunner of germ theory—or simply a symbolic touchstone for the wrath of avenging spirits. In Plato’s *Laws* and Antiphon’s *Tetralogies*, miasmatic “pollution appears not as a mess of blood,” Robert Parker notes, “but as the anger of the victim, or of avenging spirits acting on his behalf, against the man who has robbed him of the life that is his right” (106). This

is not always the case, as we can find earlier representations of miasma that suggest a pathogenic interpretation, however different it may appear from germ theory.

In the fifth century BCE, a few generations before Plato, Aeschylus provides the paradigmatic view of miasma as blood crime and family curse in the *Oresteia*. The dramatic cycle represents miasma as an intergenerational sickness that possesses its own uncanny agency and eventually requires the intervention of the gods to allay further contagion. Agamemnon's murder of his daughter engenders a hereditary pattern, "*a Curse, a Thing*," which the house of Atreus cannot escape (Aeschylus 14; emphasis added). As the Chorus of Argive Elders recognizes, the house bears a bloody pattern, which they describe as a sickness with its own consciousness and will: "For the terror returns like sickness to lurk in the house; / the secret anger [an anger that lies in ambush] remembers the child that shall be avenged" (104-05). Miasma here is both blood crime and sickness (sometimes *nosos* in Greek and sometimes designated by a host of cognate images such as frenzy, delirium, and delusion or entanglement, fear, curse, anger, abhorrence, snare, yoke, bit, etc.), thereby offering a wide array of possibilities, while being personified as a type of consciousness or memory that lies latent in the great house. The sickness thereby "dwells/remains [*mimnei*] springing up again" (Aeschylus 154)—and its reoccurrence is a contagious pattern that calls out for justice and eventually seeds the Furies to support this retribution.

Writing in the middle of the fifth century, a generation after Aeschylus's plays were first performed, Empedocles provides a cosmological context that remains important for later conceptions of miasma. Whereas Aeschylus situated miasma as a communal and familial dilemma, Empedocles depicts it as an immoral act that impairs the integrity of the individual soul. His metaphysical worldview clearly anticipates the intelligible universe of the Platonic heritage with its various levels from the spiritual unity on high to the descent into material individuation. In Empedocles's *Purifications*, bloodshed is so polluting that it impairs the soul's apparent immortality, forcing the soul to fall and even enter into lower creatures:

There is an oracle of Necessity, an ancient decree of the gods, eternal, sealed fast with broad oaths, that when one of the divine spirits whose portion is long life sinfully stains his own limbs with bloodshed, and following Hate has sworn a false oath—these must wander for thrice ten thousand seasons far from the company of the blessed, being born throughout the period into all kinds of mortal shapes, which exchange one hard way of life for another. . . . Of this number am I too now, a

fugitive from heaven and a wanderer, because I trusted in raging hate.
(Freeman 65)

This spirit is exiled and forced to endure a series of transmigrations in an attempt to atone for blood crime. Thus, the divine, fallen spirit takes on various embodiments—“for by now I have been born as boy, girl, plant, bird, and dumb sea-fish”—until it can gradually atone for its crime, taking on higher embodiments by working itself upward on the scale of nature: “At last they become seers, and bards, and physicians, and princes among earth-dwelling men, from which [state] they blossom forth as gods highest in honor” (Freeman 65, 68).

Aeschylus and Empedocles offer distinct but overlapping accounts of miasma as a communal and individual dilemma. Aeschylus suggests that while miasma can be created by immoral bloodshed, it can attain an independence from the perpetrator, not simply a stain on the hand of the killer, but “a secret anger” that “remembers” and therefore possesses a quasi-agency that is eventually personified in the Furies. Empedocles’s vision is undoubtedly more individualistic in character, situating the divine spirit within a hierarchal cosmos and respectively portraying pollution and purification as a descent through the scale of nature and a re-ascent in which the soul cleanses itself of such pollution. When we turn from religious medicine to the rational beliefs of Hippocrates and his followers, miasma ceases to involve moral transgression, having instead a physical and natural cause. Miasma, in this context, can stain or fill the air, being either “unpleasant smells descending from the stars, rising odours (from earth or marshes), or fumes coming from decomposing cadavers.” Accordingly, it “has shed all notion of individual or collective responsibility and the cause of a disease is no longer individual behavior and its relationship with religious and moral values, but rather human nature and its relationship with the surrounding environment” (Jouanna 125).

Where miasma had a range of possible meanings in the Greek world, the Roman polymath Galen (129-210 CE) gave a more limited role to miasma as “emanations [either] coming from cadavers that are not cremated, or given off from stagnant waters in summer.” Thus, “the details of [miasma’s] physiological or pathological processes were made more explicit and its etiology more complex with the combination and addition of external and internal causes” (Jouanna 132, 135). There were also new assumptions about lived space that informed Galen’s medical beliefs. Two centuries earlier, the Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (70-15 BCE) provided hygienic regulations for selecting building sites, warning particularly against swamps. Cleanliness, order, straight lines, the continuous

movement of water through aqueducts and sewers—all of these were architectural and technological developments that carried underlying assumptions about communal and individual health (Karamanou et al. 59). While Galen dispensed with earlier supernatural beliefs about bloodshed and impurity in regard to miasma, there was nonetheless a moral calculus involved, one with both intuitive and rational characteristics. As a city must be built on a propitious site with an infrastructure ensuring the safety of its citizens, so should an individual practice a regimen safeguarding his or her well-being and fortifying the body against disease.

Medieval Christianity preserved some aspects of the religious and rational Greco-Roman medical paradigms but made them subservient to a spiritual cosmology wherein the soul was “absolutely and continuously dependent on God for its existence and continuance in being” (Litsios 18). Although the term “miasma” was not in use, “medieval writers referred to ‘corruption of the air,’ pestilential air’ or putrefaction of the air” as the cause of most diseases. With the fourteenth-century outbreak of the bubonic plague, corruption of the air continued to serve as the dominant explanation as is evident in the “‘plague tractates’— [hundreds of] pamphlets dating from 1348 onward written to inform the general public about the causes of, remedies for, and prevention of the plague” (Sterner 2). The plague first appeared in Europe in the year 1346, peaking in 1353, and killing at least seventy million people. The plague did not end with the fourteenth century, becoming a part of European life well into the Renaissance and springing up intermittently through to modern times.

The plague underwent a powerful reimagining in the Italian Renaissance. Ficino, the man most responsible for reviving neoclassical thought in Europe, offered a Renaissance interpretation of miasma and the Black Death. Best known as the Medici-backed translator of Plato, the Hermetic corpus, and Plotinus, he was also a physician, promoting medical practices that adapted the religious and rational paradigms of antiquity. Written amid plague outbreaks in the 1470s, *Consilio contro la Pestilentia* (1481) presents “a coherent treatment of the contagion’s nature, its genesis and its modes of diffusion.” Ficino drew upon the medical tradition of Hippocrates and Galen, maintaining the older miasmal epidemiology that “earth poisons” and predispositions to illness were responsible for the pestilence that had so harmed Europe (Katinis 73-75). Ficino’s teachings simultaneously departed from standard medical thought, both from medieval Christian teaching and from the rational medical tradition. He situates the miasmal contagion within a Platonic cosmos with the human being occupying a central place between the higher celestial levels and the materiality of nature below.

In this respect, Ficino's "cosmos was conceived in terms of a tightly knit relationship between heaven and earth, one which could be controlled by those who knew how to canalize [the effluvia and] influences pouring down onto the earth from the stars" (Litsios 54). Talismans or emblems could be used to draw the powers from above to counter the influence of miasmal contagion below, which was a clear adaptation of earlier religious notions of purification as well as the theurgy of Neoplatonism that also used a form of astral magic.¹ Since the intelligible universe unfolds through emanation and accordingly possesses a mimetic design, both descending from the perspective of genesis and ascending from the point of view of nature, those relationships, based as they are upon similarity and likeness, can be appropriated by downward influences. Ficino thus proposes a notion of similitude in the diffusion of the plague that draws upon the ancient belief in sympathetic magic, which James Frazer aptly describes as possessing two core principles, similarity and contact: "first . . . like produces like, or . . . an effect resembles its cause; and, second . . . things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed" (13). Ficino accordingly presents his "central idea" that "the contagion diffuses itself more easily between individuals that are by nature similar, whether that similarity be one of physical complexion or astrological characteristic, according to the rule that quality is transmitted more easily between subjects that are similar" (Katinis 76).

With the idea of similitude underlying the diffusion of the miasma of plague, Ficino portrays disease to be part of a greater spiritual conflict, for the plague functions as "a particular poison that works against the 'vital spirit,' which is itself a subtle body that animates an organism and is generated in the heart by the blood." Arising from below, the disease appropriates mimetic relationships running through the cosmos, taking hold in individuals and similarly appropriating the interlinking parts of the body until it can destroy that vital center, the interior dimension of the human being, for "once the poison . . . reaches the heart, death [will] follow" (Katinis 75). With miasma threatening the heart, we find another medical paradigm that gave particular prominence to the heart as the organ through which the vital breath nourishes the whole body. This belief is ancient and can be found already in Aristotle (385-323 BCE) and in the Greek Stoic philosopher Chrysippus (279-206 BCE), who claimed "the heart to be the seat of the hegemonic soul" (Hankinson 216). Galen had sought to correct the Stoic account not by demoting the heart but

¹ For the relation between Neoplatonic theurgy and medicine, see Afonasin 333-49.

by “establishing tripartition, along Platonic lines,” for the soul in the body. In *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, he employs Plato’s tripartite notion of the soul from the *Republic* and the description of the demiurge in the *Timaeus*, assigning “the three parts of the soul, rational, spirited, and appetitive, to the brain, the heart, and the liver respectively” (198). The second part of the soul “is located in the heart and is the source of the innate heat; the arteries are the conduits for this source, which has many names: it is called the living power (*dunamis zôtikê*), the spirited power (*dunamis thumoeidês*), the living soul, and the spirited soul” (200). Within the larger context of the mutual interdependence of the soul in the three parts of the body, Galen affirms the “heart [as] the location of the governing part” in that it “initiates every voluntary motion in the other parts of the animal’s body” and, second, that “every sensation is referred to it” (212).

Medieval thinkers typically followed Galen’s anatomy of the soul and, in Ficino, we see these ancient medical assumptions placed into a new Renaissance paradigm that would take kindred but very different expressions in the thinking of Ficino’s student, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno, as well as Paracelsus and Severinus, both of whom developed alchemical forms of medicine, at once rejecting established practice as an artifact of “a dead literary tradition” and advocating “true medicine . . . founded on Christian piety and a personal knowledge of nature’s fundamentals, which were celestial and chemical” (Shackelford 37). While each of these philosophers and physicians created their own separate system, Ficino’s medical theory of the plague provided a blueprint for notions of spiritual well-being and physiological health that lasted well into the nineteenth century and continued to inform the thinking of the American Romantics, as we will see. While the soul remains immortal for Ficino in accordance with the older Platonic belief, nonetheless, the plague is not some negligible poison whose effects are merely temporary or consigned to the material levels of the cosmos alone. Rather, miasma manipulates the sympathetic structures in matter, seeking ultimately to extinguish the soul itself.

The underlying metaphysical assumptions of Ficino’s plague tract offer a way of conceiving the idealist heritage as it was being formulated in the Renaissance and then bequeathed to the nineteenth century. For Ficino, the soul is the source of life and movement, while miasma is a counter principle, the stain or corruption of static matter that, under certain circumstances, appropriates the interlinking levels in the macrocosm and, by extension, its microcosm, the human body. In the context of his greater Platonic philosophy, this life is the “divine light,” not just “an image of knowledge, but its cause. Light is a link between spiritual and corporeal realms, a

‘bond of the world’ (*vinculum universi*).” Thus, Ficino’s dictum—the “Sun itself is ‘an eternal, all-seeing eye’” (Žemla 285)—is more than the appropriation of an iconic Platonic expression; it articulates a Renaissance metaphysics of light in which “God himself is an immense light dwelling in itself” and simultaneously immanent in solar rays that “are not inanimate like the rays of a lamp, but living and perceiving, since they shine forth through the eyes of a living body, and they bring with them marvelous gifts from the imaginations and minds of the celestials” (284-85). Through the emanation of the divine light, vital life is transmitted throughout the cosmos and, within the microcosm, this life likewise emanates through the eyes and other vital organs, nourishing the body so that it too is capable of intellection and physical activity. Miasma, inversely, preys like a parasite on this intelligible structure. Instead of emanating outward to nourish the world, it invades from outside until it finds and kills the source of the nourishing breath.

From this perspective, Ficino offered a methodology to direct the human mind and body upward toward unity, creative power, and immunity from disease (Cocking 178). Although a successor like Bruno conceived of a cosmos untethered from its traditional geocentric and heliocentric moorings, his underlying beliefs about the intelligible structure of the cosmos are the same. Indeed, Bruno often writes about “a ladder of nature” with the “purest light” of God’s “active power” at the summit and “matter and darkness” at its bottom: “Starting from God there is a descent to the inferior, generated world through the ordered degrees of reality and through things, making the same journey backwards as the soul makes in its ascent to God” (Farinella 601-02). The theory of correspondences, inherited from the ancient world, plays a decisive role in this cosmology, for the summit and the base of this ladder are interconnected through a *Catena Aurea* or golden chain upon which an exchange of forces and elements takes place. The Hermetic text the *Asclepius*, which Ficino translated, depicts this journey up and down along the golden chain “as being downwards towards life and upwards towards the nourishment of the world” (qtd. in Farinella 602-03). Ficino embraced this older idealist cosmology and Bruno decisively transformed it, away from a geocentric and even heliocentric universe to one of infinite worlds with all beings seeking regeneration. Like Ficino, he preserved the notion of the human being as a creative center for this cosmology according to correspondences above and below and adapted the ancient idea, developed in Plato and Aristotle, of “placing *phantasia* between the higher and lower parts of the soul” (Cocking 18). In Bruno, phantasmal signification thereby plays a decisive role, for *phantasia* is that sensible faculty of the soul in which shadow ideas or intermediary emblems of the imagination situated

between higher and lower, internal and external, could capture divine energy and recollect the preexistent knowledge of the soul.²

Accordingly, Ficino and his contemporaries avow the anagogic transformation of the human being as a counter to disease and dissolution, a way of thinking that also aligns with alchemy's most basic beliefs about the correspondences between the macrocosm and microcosm and the transmutation of matter. From this perspective, the existence of evil and disease arises not out of some supernatural aspect of the universe but as a consequence of existence, and it requires transmutation and self-transformation as cure. In the Hermetic writings, which Ficino translated and introduced into Europe, this prescription for human health is explicit:

Nothing evil or shameful can be ascribed to the Creator. These are afflictions which follow upon coming into being, like the green on copper and dirt on the body. For the coppersmith does not make the green, nor parents the dirt on the body, nor does God create evil. But the continued existence of creation causes evil like a kind of ulcer and therefore God brought about transformation, to cleanse the impurity of birth. (Trismegistus 73)

To identify solely with the fixed forms of the lower levels of the material cosmos nurtures diseases that can then become contagious through appropriating, as we saw, the mimetic relationships running through the cosmos and the self. Self-transformation is not simply a counter to the transmission of disease; it lets the individual participate in the ongoing creation of the cosmos, allowing one to take on the work of cosmogenesis for oneself.

American Gothic and the Miasmal Dilemma

Like Europeans after the Renaissance, Americans “commonly continued to believe that epidemic fevers were caused by miasma” (Miller 190). In the medical community of the United States, however, the etiology of disease was widely debated. According to Sari Altschuler, two principal camps emerged: first, contagionists who believed that disease passed from a sick individual to a healthy one; and second, climatists who believed that disease was transmitted from the

² See Yates 199-230, especially 216-17.

environment to human beings (53). Where “typhus, typhoid fever, and tuberculosis continued to loom large in the American consciousness,” yellow fever and cholera were two diseases that profoundly shaped the ways in which Americans conceived of health (84). Cholera particularly “dealt a profound blow to the rapid professionalization of American medicine in the 1820s.” Not only was the medical community unable to treat the disease, but they were also unable to “agree upon the nature of the horrifying disease” itself (86).

While miasma generally aligned with climatism, it nonetheless provided a fluid concept capable of straddling both the contagionist and climatist perspectives. As we saw, Ficino’s miasmatic interpretation held that plague can be transmitted both through the environment and from person to person. In this context, miasma came to possess even greater power as a narrative trope, offering what Faye Marie Getz influentially termed an ahistorical “gothic epidemiology which began during the early nineteenth-century alongside the science of epidemiology itself” (266). This Gothic interpretation, Getz writes, “comprises themes of teleology, individual heroism, abrupt change, death, and most notably, a dialectic between opposing forces” (267). This dialectic involves correspondences between the microcosm and macrocosm and simultaneously articulates a modern conception of historical progress: a narrative of “revolution” that is “performed in vast cycles,” involving “annihilations” that “awaken new life,” so that “when the tumult above and below the earth is past, nature is renovated, and the mind awakens from torpor and depression to the consciousness of an intellectual existence” (277).

Getz formulated her “gothic epidemiology” in 1991 to characterize the sense of the Gothic as it is used by literary historians (279). While the term is constraining, it does partially map onto an American Romanticism that sought to champion the progressive arc of history itself. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for instance, succinctly expresses such a progressive view within a clearly delineated idealism. In “The Sovereignty of Ethics” (posthumously published in 1878), he describes how the “excellence of men consists in the completeness with which the lower system is taken up into the higher—a process of much time and delicacy, but in which no point of the lower should be left untranslated” (191). Here, the older notion of correspondences clearly operates, but with a decidedly modern emphasis upon progress. Emerson visualizes history as a “dread loom of time” with humanity as the intermediary, creatively engaging the miasmatic, poisonous threads of matter and ameliorating them into new forms:

These threads are Nature's pernicious elements, her deluges, miasma, disease, poison; her curdling cold, her hideous reptiles and worse men, cannibals, and the depravities of civilization; the secrets of the prisons of tyranny, the slave and his master, the proud man's scorn, the orphan's tears, the vices of men, lust, cruelty and pitiless avarice. These make the gloomy warp of ages. Humanity sits at the dread loom and throws the shuttle and fills it with joyful rainbows, until the sable ground is flowered all over with a woof of human industry and wisdom, virtuous examples, symbols of useful and generous arts, with beauty and pure love, courage and the victories of the just and wise over malice and wrong. (191-92)

Here, the transformation of miasmal disease is precisely what humanity creatively undertakes, translating lower into higher and thus restoring civilization to health. This process is no longer the domain of the philosopher or physician; in democratic and capitalist form, Emerson extends the contemplative praxis of the philosopher or the magnum opus of the alchemist onto industrial America itself so that the "woof of human industry" is accompanied by victories over tyranny and the institution of slavery. He thus expresses a decisive reimagining of Renaissance Neoplatonism with industrious humanity as the translating intermediary between above and below, between the animating power of "pure love" and the "dark warp" that the miasmas of tyranny and slavery produce in seeking to appropriate the cosmos. Accordingly, the Romantics of the American Renaissance were united by common metaphysical assumptions about the health of the human self and the greater social body. As Catherine L. Albanese rightly states, "American metaphysics signals a predisposition toward the ancient cosmological theory of correspondence between worlds as that theory was carried forward in the esoteric tradition of the West," and this American variant "formed in the midst of a yearning for salvation understood as solace, comfort, therapy, and healing" (13, 15).

In this section, I proceed by analyzing miasma as a philosophico-medical trope in Poe, Hawthorne, and Faulkner. In "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "Ligeia," Poe employs a symbology that powerfully expresses the ancient cosmological theory of correspondences that we found reimagined in Ficino, his Renaissance successors, and Emerson's visualization above. In Poe's fiction, the self comprises a cosmography in conflict between a miasmal pathogen seeking to appropriate the mimetic scale of nature from below and the individual attempting to counter its transmission with a

metaphysics of light. Importantly, Poe's depictions take a much more troubled form than his contemporaries, for his dark allegories of self-transformation employ an esoteric symbolism, even while unsettling the promise of cognitive and physiological transformation so fundamental to its episteme.³ Over the last thirty years, a significant body of criticism has interpreted Poe outside this idealist purview. He is seen as "a skeptical writer who uses dogmatic supposition and visionary rhetoric to debunk the cant of idealism and what he called the 'doggerel aesthetics' of his contemporaries" (Dayan 9). Branka Arsić best articulates this interpretative lens, refusing to locate Poe's writing within an aestheticized Gothic purview at all. Instead, she sees this line of inquiry as a reductive reading because it fundamentally aestheticizes Poe's narratives of terror without properly recognizing that he drew "from domains as different as biology, geology, astronomy, or medicine" (22). Emily Waples similarly sees Poe's engagement of the "miasmatic imagination of the American Gothic" as an "interpretative strategy" that explores the "conditions of embodiment itself" (24).

Arsić is undoubtedly correct to underscore Poe's "commitment to the physical" (22), and Waples rightly identifies "the miasmatic imagination" as a drama of embodiment. What these scholars minimize is that the scientific thought that Poe engaged extolled an idealist worldview. The three short stories I address below are clearly framed within a cosmos structured according to the philosophico-medical idealism of Ficino and the Platonic heritage he drew upon. In "The Masque of the Red Death," we find an ostensibly straightforward plague narrative with an unambiguous moral message: no one—not the most powerful, knowledgeable, or wealthy—can evade disease. Prince Prospero, named after Shakespeare's famous magician from *The Tempest*, attempts to seal himself and his company away from the greatest pestilence ever to plague humanity. What remains much more subtly employed is Poe's portrayal of the invasive pathogen asserting the "illimitable dominion" of "Darkness and Decay" over a metaphysics of light (Poe 490). Indeed, he implicitly articulates the victory of miasma over the integral accord between the intelligible and the sensible cosmos, the great metaphysical struggle with which

³ Where criticism has largely extolled a detranscendentalized Emersonian philosophy since the 1980s, so there has been the general tendency to interpret Poe's oeuvre as a prefiguration of "the skepticism and uncertainty that spread from the 19th century into our own era" (Cheishvili 98). Less examined is a view of Poe using idealist forms of knowledge to fashion dark allegories of self-transformation and bodily disintegration, even though a variety of studies over the years have uncovered the esoteric and alchemical influences on him. See, for instance, Versluis 72-80; Tilton 26-27; Clack, *The Marriage* 49-82 and "Strange" 367-87; St. Armand, "Usher" 1-8 and "Poe's" 1-7; and Voloshin 18-29.

Ficino's plague tract was concerned. The story concludes with the flames of the tripod, the only source of light in the Gothic setting, being extinguished permanently, and material stasis is triumphantly figured in the image of "a tall figure" who "st[ands] erect and motionless within the shadow of [an] ebony clock" (490). Thus, the conflict clearly entails an opposition between light and darkness, genesis and mimesis, and eternity and time. The clock, a mechanical symbol of time, throws a mimetic shadow over the masked figure of miasma—and even when the company attempts to unveil this figure, we discover not an agency beneath, but a "rudeness, untenanted by any tangible form" (490). Where the emanation of divine light bestows intelligibility throughout the cosmos, this masked miasma, by contrast, mimics and parasitizes this pattern of emanation so that proper ensoulment of the body is impossible and the impairment of form holds sway.

A sensitivity to the allegorical symbolism of the narrative is paramount for understanding the miasmatic progression of disease, moreover. Poe does not obviously depict the transmission of disease through the human body; rather, he employs the architectural structure of an "extensive and magnificent" abbey (485) to stage the manner in which the red death transmits itself through self and social body. The figurative coupling of architecture and the human body is, of course, ancient, codified by Vitruvius in imperial Rome in accordance with Platonic principles, but the more obvious Gothic associations come from the Renaissance, with a theater, city, or citadel typically employed to evoke the arena in which self-transformation, transmutation, and anamnesis (or recollection) can be realized. There are many such examples, but three of the most famous are the memory theater of Giulio Camillo, the solar city of Tommaso Campanella, and the alchemical citadel of Heinrich Khunrath, all of which share similar esoteric features, with numerology having particular significance in identifying the seven days of creation and the seven planetary bodies. Thus, in *L'Idée del Teatro* (1550), Camillo presents an amphitheater of seven sections that "aspires to be an *imago mundi* in which all ideas and objects might find their appropriate place by virtue of their planetary classification" (Couliano 35). In *The City of the Sun* (1602), Campanella similarly depicts "seven walls that enclose and protect a city," in turn serving the "wings of an extraordinary theater and the pages of an illustrated encyclopedia of knowledge" (Ernst 97). Khunrath's famous book on alchemy, *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (1595), also portrays a seven-sided Alchemical Citadel in which transmutation can be enacted. In this context, there can be no mistaking Poe's symbolic depiction of a "castellated" abbey (485) with seven rooms that become gradually usurped by the masked miasma until light is

extinguished altogether. Miasma, according to Ficinian principles, does not simply prey upon the social body; it invades the interior dimensions of the self until its immanent fire is destroyed. Whereas Arsić argues that “Poe shatters the coherence of any inwardness” (122), here we see cognitive and bodily interiority as the battlefield upon which different forces play. In other words, Poe’s evocation of an invaded and effaced interiority is not a subversion of the idealist heritage; it is a creative reconstitution of it.

With this Renaissance symbolism clarified, we are better able to interpret two more of Poe’s most important narratives in terms of this miasmal trope and the accompanying architectonics of the self. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe more clearly analogizes the wavering psychology of the narrator with the architecture of the Usher mansion. As Waples insightfully asserts, “the atmosphere not only pervades the material structure of the house, but incorporates into the narrator’s body itself” (23). With this, “Poe dramatizes the central anxiety of miasma theory: an acute awareness of the body’s porosity” (24). What is absent from this view is the way in which a complex understanding of the interrelations between the intelligible and sensible dimensions of the Platonic heritage is at work in the architecture of the Usher mansion. The mansion itself presents a cognitive and physiological arena that is in the process of reflecting upon its own internal organization and finding itself the subject of miasmal influences beyond its control.⁴ The cognitive architecture of the Usher house is susceptible to a host of influences, not simply divine influences like the red moon at the story’s close, but more tellingly a miasmal, earthbound contagion that arises from the polluted depths of the tarn to disseminate itself through mimesis, through likeness and imitation.

Where “The Masque of the Red Death” possesses little ambiguity in the final fate of this cognitive architecture, “Usher” stages a conflict that is much harder to interpret univocally. With “the vast house [of Usher] and its shadows” (335), the self is from the first threatened by what it perceives, phenomena acting as invasive forces that uproot reason and destabilize identity. Poe emphasizes the narrator’s psychological instability in his perception of the house: “with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit.” The narrator’s vision outward is immediately paralleled with a pattern of invasion, and Poe intensifies this phenomenological predicament with metaphors of interiority that hinge upon the house and its landscape. It is not one element alone but all the

⁴ “Usher” provides explicit references to the art of memory, both to the occult physician Robert Fludd and the architectonic philosophy of Campanella. See Engel 110.

architectural details together that constitute “an utter depression of soul.” The narrator is thus overcome by these phenomena, unable to process them properly. He is, in short, “pervaded” by what he sees, a movement inward that doubles his own outward perception of a house whose “vacant eye-like windows” invite him to look inside (317).

As many critics have observed, the subject of Poe’s story is the psychology of the narrator rather than Roderick or Madeline, both of whom implicitly serve as doubles of the narrator (Chandler 47-62; Martindale 9-11) or, as Eric W. Carlson argues, comprise part of “a tripartite self” that embodies Poe’s “psychal transcendentalism” (17-19). The narrator “grapple[s] with shadowy fancies” as does his double Roderick, who is plagued by “phantasmagoric conceptions” (Poe 325). As with the ancient notion of *phantasia* and Bruno’s later conception of shadow ideas, Poe’s phantasms are simulacra between higher and lower, talismanic signs of the imagination that can capture a regenerative power from above or be appropriated by harmful influences from below. Poe provides a visceral and unsettled portrait of what enacting or failing to enact the Renaissance belief in self-transformation might mean. Whereas the narrator initially describes “the perfect keeping of the character of the premises,” he begins to see the decay of the house by looking into its reflection in the tarn, which Poe depicts later with the image of “rank miasma” (331). The mimetic notion of reflection or likeness is thus powerfully associated with miasmatic notions of disease and pollution, “a pestilent and mystic vapor” emanating upward from the “decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn” (317). As with Ficino’s description of the plague, such pestilence is contagious, doubling itself from below through likeness and appropriating the interlinking mimetic structure that runs upward through the cosmos or, in the case of the microcosm, through the mind and body of the self.

While Poe does not identify the specific cause of the contagion, he intimates that the shadow imagery the narrator sees and the disease he intuits are his own. After all, the narrator is the one who entombs Madeline, burying her in a vault directly under his own room—a crime entangled in a greater history of violence, the vault below once a medieval torture chamber and storehouse for explosives. Here, we also see the older religious context for miasma. The murdered and decaying corpse of Madeline refuses to lie still, polluting the house—and by extension, the individual self—with a contagion that quickly becomes overwhelming. Yet we would be too quick to relegate the narrator to the fate of Prince Prospero and his company. “Usher” is at the very least an open-ended miasmatic tale. As Barton Levi St. Armand argued in 1972, Poe integrates an expressly alchemical symbolism of

renewal into the narrative. St. Armand demonstrates that the tale can be interpreted as the stages of producing the philosopher's stone. Instead of succumbing to miasmal destruction, the narrator of "Usher" may well experience the precise opposite, the alchemical renewal of fallen matter into its most vital form, the *prima materia*—not a transcendence from matter but the original ensoulment of the physical.

Like "Usher," "Ligeia" presents this problem of disease, infecting from below and hovering everywhere, not only in the European setting of decay but also in the initial failure of human memory to constitute itself properly. Where the psychology of the narrator in "Usher" is clearly jeopardized, so too the narrator of "Ligeia" laments losing his spiritual vision and longs to recover it in the figure of his beloved Ligeia, whom critics typically interpret as a doppelgänger or symbol of transcendental perception.⁵ From the opening sentence of the story, the narrator declares that he can no longer remember his love. In fact, he does not affirm an actual history at all, retaining only a belief as to where he met Ligeia: "Yet I believe that I met her first and most frequently in some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine" (262). Poe thus tropes the narrator's deteriorating memory with this unnamed decaying city and proceeds to present the narrator's efforts to recover his lost transcendental vision and, thus, to renew the dead and decaying corpse that has succumbed to an unnamed disease.

From this perspective, "Ligeia" can be interpreted as an alchemical allegory of reminiscence rather than an account of lost love. Once again employing the intelligible/sensible cosmos of the Renaissance as a figurative map for human embodiment, Poe stages a conflict between the decay of the body and a regenerative power the narrator can hardly remember, a conflict that is soon spatialized with an architectonics in which the human form is the intermediary between the "conqueror Worm" (269) below and the astral influences above that can restore lost cognitive power. Indeed, Ligeia's struggle against death evokes a miasmal and mimetic menace asserting its dominion from below: "Words are impotent to convey any just idea of the fierceness of resistance with which she wrestled with the Shadow" (267). The conflict thereby oscillates between the decaying body and a spiritual vision capable in its most illumined moments of transmuting dead inscriptions on the page to golden writing. As Ligeia dies, the narrator's own vision fails, the once golden letters now irrevocably mediated: "Wanting the radiant lustre of her eyes, letters, lambent and golden, grew duller than Saturnian lead" (266-67). In order to

⁵ See Sencindiver 103-11 and Herndon 113-29, respectively.

overcome the mimetic power of the “Shadow”—that miasmal threat that seeks to jeopardize immanent reality—the narrator gradually recollects the mystery surrounding Ligeia, figuratively ascending from shadows to nature to illumined vision and implicitly seeking to transmute that dull “Saturnian lead” into an animate principle, to produce, as St. Armand contended with “Usher,” the *prima materia* itself. At first, the narrator only recalls Ligeia as a “shadow that comes and goes” before learning to remember the greater mystery of her eyes in his own perception of natural phenomena: “I recognized it, let me repeat, sometimes in the survey of a rapidly-growing vine—in the contemplation of a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water” (265). The narrator’s transition from decaying city of the Rhine to magnificent chamber located in a high turret of a dilapidated abbey in England figuratively situates this drama of ascent, emphasizing the vertical dimension of consciousness that was fundamental for the Renaissance and alchemical belief in self-transformation and transmutation. In this chamber draped from ceiling to floor with golden curtains, the transmutation of the dead body can be achieved.

As with Renaissance memory systems in which phantasmal writing can capture divine power, the “phantasmagoric effect of the room” (271) is central to the ritual Poe dramatizes. In the turret, situated midway between earth and heaven, the narrator manipulates talismans and emblems, black monstrous shapes stitched into the golden curtains, with an artificial “current of wind” in an effort to animate dead matter. Serving as the phantasmal interposition between higher and lower, inner and outer, the turret nonetheless becomes a site of confusion, even contagious entanglement. “Ligeia” may very well entail the narrator’s own susceptibility to disease or the possibility that his new wife has succumbed to the same malady that once affected Ligeia. Whatever the case, the return of such vision does not provide any reassurance; rather, Poe’s adaptation of an idealist and esoteric symbolism to clothe or strip modern consciousness is at once confirmed and unsettled in psychological depictions of mental instability and the threat of contagious disease.

Readers and critics have thus been divided about Poe’s artistic vision, some seeing masterful accounts of a disintegration process of the psyche, while others insist that his work entails “not so much death and annihilation as the spiritual rebirth or rediscovery of the lost psychal power essential to every man and artist seeking his fullest self-realization” (Carlson 20). Such a division of critical opinion certainly expresses the success of Poe’s unsettled vision. Ligeia’s regeneration is a long sought for, terrifying outcome that cannot definitely reconstitute the narrator’s transcendental vision—and at the close of “Usher,” the house sinks into its own

miasmatic reflection, leaving the success of the narrator's experiment disconcertingly open-ended, either an alchemical consummation of rebirth as St. Armand argues⁶ or a process of "physical dissolution, without any hint of religious redemption" as Shu-ting Kao conversely contends (16). In both cases, the movement upward toward cognitive transformation and the downward influence that promotes disease and mental dissolution offer figurative trajectories of an embodied consciousness struggling with its own internal coherence—an interpretative burden tacitly but implicitly placed upon the act of reading. From the beginning of "Usher," the narrator uses his vision in an effort "to modify" the house's "sorrowful impression" by "a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene" (317-18). Like the narrator, the reader perceives a cognitive design, evoked with words and represented by architecture, but the nature of the mental transformation remains open to new interpretative arrangements, a feature that suggests modern subjectivity but is founded upon an idealist insight that no design is ever finished, requiring a present act of consciousness to animate the content by placing it into new configurations.

Poe's architectural tropes of cognitive interiority are thus inherited from an older tradition that conceived of the human mind and body as a materially configured matrix participating in, and corresponding to, the hierarchy of the cosmos, either to the devolution of the human form or to the potential health and restoration of the divine body. In Hawthorne's fiction, the intergenerational construction of the self similarly involves this older cosmic map for human consciousness. Like his contemporaries, Hawthorne understood that esoteric forms of thought were part of a heritage that had been systemically suppressed by religious institutions for hundreds of years. His awareness that his own ancestor, John Hathorne, had served as a judge in the Salem witch trials provides a personal perspective on an author struggling to critique institutional power in the United States and to articulate the core transcendentalist belief that an individual's own cognitive interiority can serve as a counterweight to this burden of history.

The architectural strategy so fundamental to Poe's stories immediately takes precedence in Hawthorne's novel, with the narrator declaring that the "aspect of the venerable mansion" has the effect of "a human countenance" (5). The architecture of the mansion thereby stages a drama in which the depths of the self are diseased, the conflict between miasma and a metaphysics of light unfolding as the Puritan

⁶ See St. Armand 8.

effacement of an earlier pattern of mystical belief and magic.⁷ Hawthorne's use of cognitive architecture is precise in this respect, for Colonel Pyncheon's responsibility for the murder of Matthew Maule on the charges of witchcraft pollutes the "deep foundations of [his] mansion" and, by extension, the depths of the intergenerational self. In a similar manner to Poe's depiction of the diseased Usher line, Hawthorne characterizes the Pyncheon family curse in terms of a well-established association of contagion with heredity. This association can be traced back to ancient Greece, and there were modern variations as well: as Martin S. Pernick writes, "nineteenth-century Lamarkians held that diseases acquired by contagion literally could become hereditary" (861). In Hawthorne, we have a striking adaptation, since it is not the murdered body that produces the miasmal curse upon the family; rather, it is the Colonel's own body that has corrupted the depths of the house and the hereditary line: "[Colonel Pyncheon] lays his own dead corpse beneath the underpinning, as one may say, and hangs his frowning picture on the wall, and, after thus converting himself into an Evil Destiny, expects his remotest great-grandchildren to be happy there!" (9-10). In relation to Ficino's theory of plague in which dead bodies give rise to miasmata that then spreads through similitude, here, the pollution of the dead corpse is serially reduplicated onto a series of surfaces, arising from below and spreading upward through an interlinking mimetic chain, symbolized initially by the "frowning picture on the wall," later by the "looking glass" that "contain[s] within its depths all the shapes that had ever been reflected there" (20), and, lastly, by the stern daguerreotype of Judge Pyncheon himself.⁸ Here again we find a metaphorical confusion between architectural surfaces and the human body itself. Pyncheon bears a contagion that is transmuted through hereditary and architectural means.

Not all mimetic images bear this pollution, however. The reflections upon the water of Maule's well outside the house serve as a counterweight to this history. While the well possesses its own danger in being "bewitched," as Holgrave says, it

⁷ Sophia Bamert has recognized miasma as a major theme of the novel, although her application of it is entirely different than mine. She views "descriptions of atmosphere" as "a central paradox of the Anthropocene," exploring how Hawthorne "employs proliferating figures of atmosphere to undermine the ideological power of linear time" that undergirds industrial capitalism (1-2).

⁸ Part of the discord that visual imitation evokes in Hawthorne's work involves the uneasy relationship between "surface likeness" and "truth." According to Susan S. Williams, Hawthorne "identified the daguerreotype's power of exact representation as its most salient feature, but added to the discussion the notion of depth" (17). Alan Trachtenberg helpfully argues that "the daguerreotype plays a strategic role in the [novel] as an emblem of ambiguity," situated between "science and magic" as well as "modernity and tradition" (460).

is located in the one place that preserves the ancient correspondences between heaven and earth. In contrast to the “dismal shadow of the house” and the “dusty town,” the “eye of heaven” smiles down to the little plot of garden. Although nature has been “elsewhere overwhelmed” and “driven out” (87), in the garden a metaphysics of light still holds sway, and the suppressed magical paradigm associated with Holgrave’s ancestor, the murdered magician, can be found once more in the center of this refuge. Thus, the garden is one of the very few places that “nature might fairly claim as her inalienable property, in spite of whatever man could do to render it his own” (88). Maule’s well is thereby a fountain that presents a decisive foil for the miasmal pollution underneath the house. In contrast to the infected architecture, “the play and slight agitation of the water, in its upward gush, wrought magically with these variegated pebbles, and made a continually shifting apparition of quaint figures, vanishing too suddenly to be definable” (88). Unlike the Pyncheon miasma, the well, similarly associated with the depths, produces magical images that are continually playful and shifting in the sunlight. In the final paragraph of the novel, the positive associations with this earlier paradigm of correspondences and magic are explicit, for the well “throwing up a succession of kaleidoscopic pictures, in which a gifted eye might have seen fore-shadowed the coming fortunes” of the household (319). In other words, the well offers a liminal site upon which the *phantasmata* of the imagination are transmuted in the imagery of ascent and union (“Love’s web of sorcery”), a clear signal that Holgrave’s alchemy of love has helped to restore the household and unite the two discordant families.

In the first half of the novel, Hawthorne’s intergenerational saga dramatizes the miasmal dominance of mimesis over these transformative depths of the self that align with the eye of heaven. Clifford Pyncheon represents the absolute extreme of this pathology. He looks through “an arched window” of “uncommonly large dimensions,” eager to take in the sights of the surrounding land but always unable to abide anything new:

Nothing gives a sadder sense of decay than this loss or suspension of the power to deal with unaccustomed things, and to keep up with the swiftness of the passing moment. It can merely be a suspended animation; for, were the power actually to perish, there would be little use of immortality. We are less than ghosts, for the time being, whenever this calamity befalls us. (161)

Clifford languishes under the curse of the household, looking through the mediating window and failing “to keep up with the swiftness of the passing moment.” Suffering under the miasmal influence that seeks absolute stasis, as we saw in Poe’s narratives, Clifford has lost those interior sources, that “immortality” or higher celestial power without which the self loses its form and substance, prospectively enduring the ultimate mimetic curse and becoming “less than a ghost,” losing, in other words, even the status of semblance that marks a mimetic chain from essence to shadow. This is the prospective fate that we found triumphant at the end of Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death,” since the unmasking of the miasma reveals the total loss of any “tangible form” whatsoever.

In contrast to Clifford, Holgrave searches for the key to restore the Pyncheon household. As a Maule, Holgrave is associated with an earlier paradigm of magic and is himself a student of mimesis, but only so long as he seeks to resolve the curse. Like the transcendentalists, he is a reformer, a believer that “the moss-grown and rotten Past is to be torn down, and lifeless institutions to be thrust out of the way, and their dead corpses buried, and everything to begin anew” (179). Inside the house, however, he works as a daguerreotypist or, as Jacob Wamberg argues, a hybrid between alchemist and scientist (83-85), seeking to understand the miasmal and mimetic injunction under which the Pyncheon line labors. As the reader eventually discovers, Holgrave is in truth the Renaissance man, endowed with the powers of self-transformation in his ability to discard “one exterior” after another while always remaining true to his essential self:

amid all these personal vicissitudes, he had never lost his identity. Homeless as he had been, —continually changing his whereabouts, and, therefore, responsible neither to public opinion nor to individuals, —putting off one exterior, and snatching up another, to be soon shifted for a third, —he had never violated the innermost man, but had carried his conscience along with him. It was impossible to know Holgrave without recognizing this to be the fact.
(177)

Hawthorne’s abiding interest in transcendentalism and alchemical regeneration clearly informs this portrait (Swann 371-87). Holgrave possesses the regenerative powers of the alchemist or the artist, capable of freeing the Pyncheons from the miasmal pollution at the depths of the house. The influence of the rotten past can

thus be overcome. Under his direction, the passage into the depths is a liberating movement, which Hawthorne imagines in an egalitarian manner:

once in every half century at longest, a family should be merged into the great, obscure mass of humanity, and forget all about its ancestors. Human blood, in order to keep its freshness, should run in hidden streams, as the water of an aqueduct is conveyed in subterranean pipes. (185)

Like Emerson, who advocated that the miasmal institutions of tyranny and slavery be translated into a higher language, Hawthorne imagines the breaking of the feudal order as a necessary purification, since it is the Pyncheon desire for an aristocratic bloodline that initiates the family's mental and physiological degeneration in the first place (Smith 29).

At the conclusion of the novel, Holgrave no longer has any need of the mimetic arts, giving up his profession as daguerreotypist and marrying Phoebe Pyncheon so as to unite the two discordant families that have been polluted by miasmal murder. In this case, Hawthorne's symbolism is even more manifest than Poe's, for the couple's regenerative union is strengthened by their very names. Holgrave's name is a portmanteau in which "holy" and "grave" emphasize the underlying logic that the unsettled grave of his murdered ancestor has been transformed, while Phoebe is the feminine form of the Latin name Phoebus (Apollo in Greek), meaning shining, bright, and radiant. Here, we see an associative symbolism in which a metaphysics of light is ultimately restored and the Gothic tale is transformed into a romance where life and liberty are once again possible for the two families.

Poe and Hawthorne thus address an older Renaissance conflict between a metaphysics of light and miasma in different yet corresponding ways, embracing the spatial use of architecture to figure cognitive interiority. In "Usher," such contagion is imminent, the Usher mansion infected by the miasmal influence of death and decay that emanates from below, first from the tarn itself and later from the room of murder that lies underneath the sleeping chamber of the narrator. A similar problem pervades Hawthorne's fiction, for an unresolved blood crime infects the mnemonic constitution of the self and the greater social body. In the symbolic terms of *The House of the Seven Gables*, Pyncheon placed his own dead body under the foundations of the house, polluting the cognitive constitution of an intergenerational subject that is at once familial and prospectively national. A

profound anxiety pervades the cognitive makeup of the self, therefore, expressing both a distrust of social institutions and an implicit crisis in a sense of national memory.

When we trace the influence of this Gothic paradigm into the work of high modernism, we find a thoroughly metafictional interpretation of miasma as a philosophico-medical trope. In Faulkner's most critically celebrated novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, the Southern dynastic legacy of slavery is polluted with miasma, a common nineteenth-century trope for the institution to be sure (Miller 191). Here, however, miasma also possesses its ancient and tragic characteristics, with Aeschylus's *Oresteia* as a crucial intertextual allusion in the novel. We are told that Thomas Sutpen, a plantation owner in northeast Mississippi and the central character of the novel, had assumed the pollution long before he erected his plantation in the American South. While in Haiti, Sutpen administered "a soil manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation." And from this polluted soil, he hears the spilled blood call out for vengeance: "the planting of men too; the yet intact bones and brains in which the old unsleeping blood that had vanished into the earth they trod still cried out for vengeance" (202).

Faulkner imagines this miasmal crime both in terms of colonial slavery writ large and in Sutpen's individual family. The murdered body of Charles Bon, Sutpen's unacknowledged, mixed-race first son, is the pollution that taints the family. Aunt Rosa articulates this familial miasma within a paradigm strikingly reminiscent of the intelligible/sensible dynamic of the Platonic heritage. As Emerson, Poe, and Hawthorne conceptualized a metaphysics of light as the only cure for such pollution, so Faulkner makes the crisis pivot upon the correspondences of the solar light and the miasmal earth below:

Or perhaps it is no lack of courage either: not cowardice which will not face that sickness at the prime foundation of this factual scheme from which the prisoner soul, miasmal-distillant, wroils ever upward sunward, tugs its tenuous prisoner arteries and veins and prisoning in its turn that spark, that dream which, as the globy and complete instant of its freedom mirrors and repeats (repeats? creates, reduces to a fragile evanescent iridescent sphere) all of space and time and massy earth, relicts the seething and anonymous miasmal mass which in all the years of time has taught itself no boon of death but only how to recreate, renew; and dies, is gone, vanished: nothing. (114)

The individual stained with blood bears a spiritual burden, Rosa states; this individual becomes “a prisoner soul” who attempts to escape by moving upward toward the sun in order to cleanse the impurity of his crime, but the “miasmal mass” below has already assimilated his being so that he may only recreate the sickness, but without true agency or personhood.

What is more, this miasmal sickness at the “prime foundation” not only infects others, but prospectively reaches out through the text itself, through “this factual scheme,” as Rosa admits, to pollute all those who come into contact with it. Faulkner’s conception of miasma thereby reassumes its original, ancient context and simultaneously exhibits a self-reflexive feature. To be sure, the spilt blood potentially haunts the text itself as well as those who seek to peer beneath surfaces into the hidden depths below. We saw this anticipated by Ficino, when he described the miasma of plague transmitted through mimesis, and centuries later by the American Romantics, who depict miasma spreading onto mimetic surfaces, from the reflective tarn to the walls of the Usher mansion in Poe and from the dead body of Pyncheon to the portraits and looking glass lining the walls of the house above in Hawthorne. This self-reflexive strategy is much more prominent in Faulkner’s novel. Sutpen first appears, for instance, upon a “schoolprize water color” with “faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his air grim, haggard, and tatter-ran.” Here, Quentin Compson, the young man who receives the Sutpen story generations later, imagines the plantation patriarch as “a ghost” asserting itself upon a textual surface, for the ghost “would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color” (4). The imagery is certainly resistant to realistic portrayal, but Faulkner’s deft hand is at play in the Gothic evocation of a sulphur-reeking ghost that arises from the depths of the earth to trouble the textual processes that try to describe him.

This initial depiction of Sutpen establishes the symbolic code both for him and for his plantation complex, moreover. By the novel’s conclusion, the Sutpen manor is likewise portrayed as a textual surface that has already violently transmitted its information. It evokes the novel’s opening metafictional imagery of Sutpen leaping out of a painting, except now this “canvas curtain” of “one dimension” bears a tear running perpendicularly across it, indicating that the miasmal personification has already escaped the page:

It loomed, bulked, square and enormous, with jagged half-topped chimneys, its roofline sagging a little; for an instant as they moved, hurried toward it Quentin saw completely through it a ragged segment of sky with three hot stars in it as if the house were of one dimension, painted on a canvas curtain in which there was a tear; now, almost beneath it the dead furnace-breath of air in which they moved seemed to reek in slow and protracted violence with a smell of desolation and decay as if the wood of which it was built were flesh. (293)

Certainly, the house conceals the murderer, Henry Sutpen, along with the fratricidal motivations that Quentin and Shreve attempt to discover in their narrative collaboration.⁹ Yet Faulkner simultaneously develops another avenue of symbolic discovery, for the torn canvas allows Quentin and the reader to see beyond the surface and to perceive a striking vertical symbolism that aligns the “three bright stars” above with the “dead furnace-breath of air” below. As the Sutpen ghost initially appeared upon “schoolprize water color” with his hand raised toward the heavens, here, the “canvas curtain” of the manor evokes another insidious appropriation of metaphysical correspondences between heaven and earth. The “three hot stars”—the celestial signs guiding the wise men to the site of Christ’s birth—locate the “looming” and “enormous” hierarchical dimensions of the plantation complex. Like the tragic miasma of old, it is a “*Curse, a Thing*” (Aeschylus 14)—and instead of guiding the seeker toward new creation, the stars connote that the institution itself has taken on an insidious quasi-agency. Indeed, its “slow and protracted violence” is described sensuously and physically as if the architectural edifice “were flesh.”

The novel’s self-reflexive coda therefore intimates that a polluted information paradigm is already transmitting itself into the perceiver. This may seem to be an entirely new feature of the philosophico-medical trope of miasma we have explored—and certainly the metafictional insistences could not have hitherto existed in the same way. Yet the ancient cosmological theory of correspondence undergirds Faulkner’s framework; the older cosmography that makes the human form an architectonics between earth and heaven returns here as a structural feature of textuality itself. Just as the ancients understood that there is an intimate link between ourselves and our environment, so Faulkner conceives of the page as part

⁹ Erin Pearson attends to this notion of Gothic concealment, terming it a “fusion between two spatial models of hidden knowledge—the closet and the crypt” (343).

of the cognitive space of the reader. The words themselves are not just neutral, unoffending signatures; they are mimetically bound up in what they represent and, hence, they may yet transmit a content that we, the readers, may not find palatable, that we may, in fact, find decidedly harmful to our well-being. And we can conclude as well that the logic that the ancients applied to such contagion is not so strange after all, not simply a feature of an obsolete religious medicine but still present in our most sophisticated art. Although miasma itself ceases to possess currency as a medical paradigm, it nonetheless remains part of a literary heritage that we apply to make sense of the world about and within us.

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