



Poe's "Metzengerstein" – Untangling the Skeins

Dr. Vikram Krishan Koshal

Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty) – English, IAS & Allied Services Training Centre, Punjabi University Patiala

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Abstract— *Poe's "Metzengerstein" stands in a class of its own. It is first and foremost, a Gothic tale but, at the same time, it is much more as well. The Gothic mores embedded in the narrative are open to all the usual interpretations associated with Gothicism. Fear induced by the uncanny in the Freudian sense of unheimliche is an integral part of the text under consideration. What makes this tale special is the fact that the Gothic conventions have been used as an allegory for the decline and disintegration but ultimate vindication of creative imagination. The contemporary commodification of literature makes a writer's journey a tight ropewalk as he traverses the precarious path marked by the breakdown of 'Imagination' in the Coleridgean sense of the term but culminating in its definitive exoneration. Viewed from a modern standpoint, "Metzengerstein" can be looked upon as a projection of Poe's own fears and desires. It is also a repository of our apprehensions of being a 'Doppelganger'.*

Keywords— *Gothic, Imagination, Fears & Desires, Doppelganger.*

The present article seeks to unravel the various levels of meaning embedded in the narrative of Poe's "Metzengerstein". The Gothic tropes have been deciphered and their significance highlighted. The autobiographical elements that were, perhaps, unconsciously projected into the fabric of the tale by the writer, have also been brought into sharp focus. At the same time, the article examines how this Gothic tale adroitly showcases the very real concerns that weighed on Poe's mind regarding the future of 'inspiration' and 'imagination' in a world wherein even literature is bought and sold.

Edgar Allan Poe's "Metzengerstein" (1832) goes all out to prove that the elements of terror in a Gothic narrative are not mere decorative literary devices. They are actually the off shoots of the Gothic's concern with the duality of human experience. Also, they are a manifestation of two thousand years of cultural fears. Kelly Hurley is not far off the mark when she credits the Gothic with 'invention' of a systematic discourse of the irrational, an 'invention' that precedes Freud's first glimmerings about the unconscious (Hurley, 204). Talking in the Freudian 'dream-work' mode, it can be said that the Gothic is an expression of the ambivalently attractive, 'female', unconscious 'other' of 18th century male-

centered conscious 'Reason'. A close examination of the text under consideration brings out the importance of Gothic sublimity as a form to induce fear, especially the one induced by the uncanny in the Freudian sense of *unheimliche* (Freud 12). It is noteworthy that Gothic sublime is fundamentally effective and pictorial as opposed to a Romantic sublime which is hermeneutic and visionary.

Gothic motifs are sprinkled liberally all over Poe's "Metzengerstein" (1832), which was one of the three stories that he wrote after the commercial failure of his third volume of verse *Poems* (1931). The other two stories are "The Visionary" (1834) and "Berenice" (1835). Some commentators, reviewing the long list of Gothicism in the tale, jump to the conclusion that this story might have been an attempt at parodying the Gothic genre.

Considering Poe's penchant for humour and satire this opinion cannot be said to be indefensible. However, the Gothic extravaganza of "Metzengerstein" featuring a cryptic curse, an animated portrait, grand estates, feuding nobles, a dramatic final conflagration and a villain who is entirely in line with other Gothic blackguards simply show the writer's expertise as a Gothicismist. When one compares

the original version of the story with the final one, one realises that Poe has gradually refined away all crudities and made a quite serious attempt to write a successful Gothic story without any intention of exaggerating the Gothic elements for humorous or satiric effect.

A close reading of "Metzengerstein" reveals Poe's indebtedness to Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764). Although the two tales are quite distinct from each other, four points of similarity are noticeable: The Gothic castle, the prophecy, the animated picture and the fall of the castle accompanied by an extinction of the family. *The Castle of Otranto* has been described by Walpole in detail as a typical feudal structure with towers and turrets and all the paraphernalia of medieval ethos. The palace of Metzengerstein has not been presented in minute detail but the reader is informed that it was the biggest and most splendid of all the castles belonging to the Baron. But, the splendour is overshadowed by an aura of desolation.

The prophecy in both the stories is rooted in the enmity that exists between two illustrious houses. In *The Castle of Otranto* the prophecy is that the lordship of Otranto would pass from the hands of the family that occupied it "whenever the real owner had grown too large to inhabit it". In "Metzengerstein" the prophecy is that a lofty name would fall "when, as the rider over his horse, the mortality of Metzengerstein shall triumph over the immortality of Berlifitzing" (*Collected Works of Poe* 186).

The animated pictures in both the stories are likenesses of major figures in the two tales. In the case of *Otranto*, the animated picture is that of Manfred's grandfather while in "Metzengerstein" the design on the tapestry depicts Frederick's (Baron Metzengerstein) ancestor on the verge of plunging his dagger into his rival, a Berlifitzing. Both Manfred and Fredrick find that they are almost unable to take their eyes away from the concerned picture.

When the palace of Metzengerstein falls, it entails an extinction of the line of Metzengerstein. In the same way, when Manfred's castle is destroyed, it implies an end to his blood line as he and Hippolita are living without heirs and decide to take on "the habit of religion".

The German writer Hoffman's *Die Exlixiere de Teufels* is also said to have provided a model for "Metzengerstein". Poe had some knowledge of the German language and had read Hoffman at about this time. Also, English translations of Hoffman's tales were readily available by the time Poe came to write "Metzengerstein".

The Gothic tone of the narrative is set right in the beginning itself. As the story begins, the young Baron Fredrick of Metzengerstein is presented calmly watching his rival Berlifitzing's castle going up in flames. He is

seated in an upper chamber of his own palace. A tapestry depicting an episode from the feud between the Metzengersteins and the Berlifitzings catches his attention. A Saracen ancestor of Berlifitzing has been unhorsed and is about to be killed by a Metzengerstein who holds a dagger in his hand. The startling thing is that after some time the head of the rider-less horse seems to have changed position. Soon, it is noticed that a mysterious horse has appeared in the courtyard of the palace. The portion of the tapestry where the horse had been pictured, disappears. There follows a "perverse" attachment between the young Baron Metzengerstein and the strange steed which ultimately plunges into flames with Metzengerstein still seated on its back when the latter's palace catches fire. Clearly, this demon horse is not an ordinary animal. It could be the spirit of Berlifitzing whose palace was destroyed by fire for which Metzengerstein himself, it is hinted, might have been responsible. Or it might be an embodiment of nemesis overtaking the impious Baron. Whatever it is, it is not normal and natural. Besides, men or animals coming out of pictures, stepping out of frames and coming to life are not a part of popular fiction which aims at imitating life as it is. But, they are very much in keeping with the ethos of Gothic fiction.

Scholars like Travis Montgomery talk of Oriental Gothic in Poe's "Metzengerstein". The reader is told of Berlifitzing's "Saracen Ancestor" and Azrail, "The Quranic angel of death". This fusion of the Orient and the Gothic serves a unique purpose in the case of Poe's writing. In his *Poems* (1831) published shortly before "Metzengerstein", Oriental devices appear repeatedly. The poems examine the craft of writing and the nature of inspiration and many of them showcase 'East' as a symbol of poetic genius and 'West' as unimaginativeness. It can therefore be said that Poe continues his investigation of authorship in his prose works through the use of Gothic and oriental gimmicks. The first three stories that he wrote indirectly show his concerns regarding the demands and pitfalls of authorship. The rise of modern capitalism had changed the conditions of literary production. Until Poe's time, literature had been the field of leisured gentlemen and educated professionals. Now, all of a sudden, books (or, literature for that matter) turned into a commodity and bewildered authors had to contend with business-minded publishers and changing public tastes. This impinged upon creativity and curtailed artistic freedom and must have been a 'Gothic' experience for many writers. Montgomery observes in this connection:

Gothic fiction, which presents 'threats of disintegration', mental and social, offered a proper vehicle for Poe's own anguished response to the

challenges he and others faced while negotiating their conflicting roles as artists and professionals (Poe's *Oriental Gothic* 5)

For Poe, preserving the sanctity of the imagination for him symbolically associated with the Middle East, was of the utmost importance. "Metzengerstein", "The Visionary" and "Berenice" have a thematic similarity with the poems that he published immediately before them. All these stories make use of Gothic and Oriental devices and when read between the lines, constitute a dramatization of artistic failure in addition to imaginative deterioration consequent upon a betrayal of inspiration. American publishers catered to public taste which, at that time, was in favour of, well known British writers. "Metzengerstein" records Poe's fears regarding the ultimate destiny that awaited imagination and inspiration in a world where works of literature had been commodified.

As far as Gothic conventions are concerned, it is obvious that they are scattered all over the story and so it is quite easy to identify the Gothic pedigree of Metzengerstein. But, discerning the writer's fears figuratively expressed through the Gothic framework is not an easy job. It has also to be kept in mind that discerning the writer's anxieties does not put a cap on other interpretations of the tale as its Gothic qualities make it open to more than one interpretation.

The allegorical role assigned to Metzengerstein dawns upon the reader when he realizes that Poe has denied him the characteristics associated with a typical Gothic villain. It is true that the writer states that he indulged in "debaucheries – flagrant treacheries – unheard-of-atrocities" committed in "the space of three days" (13). But, other than this inventory, no details are given of the young noble's transgressions. The reader knows practically nothing of how his atrocities hurt others whereas usually a Gothic tale gives detailed descriptions of the protagonists' villainies and in this way, arouses sympathy for the victims. This unconventional characterization occasionally confuses some scholars into presuming the story to be a morality tale. However, "Metzengerstein" remains rather unsuccessful if regarded purely as a morality story as it gives little ethical guidance to the reader.

Poe does emphasize the 'spiritual' deficiency of the chief character. When his mother dies, he remains totally impassive. The reader is informed that he was "heartless", "self-willed" and immune to "all holy thoughts" (12). Except for this single reference to "holy thoughts" there is absolutely no comment on the religious aspect of the young Baron's transgression. This muting of the religious overtones of Metzengerstein's misdeeds

automatically focuses the reader's attention on their allegorical significance. In sharp contrast to his mother who was a woman of sympathy and imagination, the young Frederick Metzengerstein with his callous nature emerges as a symbolic figure for the unimaginative artist who lacks greatness of soul, the internal expansiveness that was so valued by the Romantics. The artist whose imagination is bestowed with visionary power is able to reconcile earthly contraries "of self and other, of mind and nature, of subject and other" (Day 58).

This reconciliation takes place in the mind, which houses imagination. No visionary, the Baron ignores his mother's spiritual legacy and indulges his desire for power and pleasure. Looked at from this angle, the Baron's behaviours become a symbol of the behaviour of those writers who reject the claims of imagination for the sake of material gains. The metempsychosis theme in the story starts serving an ironic purpose with the story driving home a contrast between horse (with soul) and rider (without soul) that underscores the Baron's imaginative decline. It is pertinent to mention here that Poe's recognition of the importance of imagination is clearly influenced by the importance that Coleridge gave to imagination in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817). There was a popular fascination with the Middle East in Poe's day and he has used the Orient as a representative figure for creative imagination. Edward W. Said states that the Orient in nineteenth century art appears as "less a place than a *topos*, a figurative devise rather than a realistic rendering of Eastern folkways" (Said 177). Poe is able to keep the theme of embattled genius alive throughout the story by a continuous scattering of references to the Orient. His indebtedness to the Gothic tradition is evident in the selection of Hungary in Europe as the locale of his tale.

But, by choosing Hungary as the stage, he has also managed to emphasize the theme of East/West conflict. In the sixteenth century, Hungary had been the site of numerous battles between Christians from the West and Muslims from the East. Thus, the Hungarian setting adds to the symbolic significance of the Metzengerstein-Berlitzing conflict. In destroying his 'Saracen' adversary, Metzengerstein is strangulating creative vision and in Berlitzing's final revenge, the transcendence of imagination is vindicated. The most covert Oriental reference in the story occurs towards the end when the Baron, on horseback, is careering towards his burning castle and the spectators exclaim "Azrael" (23). Azrael in Muslim tradition is the angel of death.

Poe has presented a clever inversion of Prophet Mohammad's Night Journey in the final ride of Metzengerstein. While the Prophet's Night Journey culminates in enlightenment and the foundation of an

enduring spiritual legacy, Metzengerstein wild ride simply ends in end. In symbolic terms, Prophet Mohammad, an oriental figure, stands for imaginative excellence and Metzengerstein stands for those writers who deny imaginative creativity and write only for fame and prosperity. Berlifitzing stands for creative energy. In seeking to destroy him, Metzengerstein gets destroyed himself. It is the triumph of creative imagination.

Benjamin F. Fisher is right when he says that Poe's "Metzengerstein" is "not a hoax" (Fisher, "Poe's Metzengerstein" 487-494). It is a serious attempt at writing a Gothic tale that is open to diverse interpretation. It was one of five tales that Poe entered in a competition for "the best American tale" sponsored by the *Philadelphia Saturday Courier* in 1932. He must have had the wide extent of the readership attracted to Gothic tales in mind when he wrote these stories as contemporary magazines were publishing Gothic narratives in large numbers. In this connection, Poe himself wrote, "To be appreciated you must be read, and these things are invariably sought after with avidity". (*The collected letters of Edgar Allan Poe* 85). As published in the *Saturday Courier*, "Metzengerstein" gave the impression of being more of a conventional Gothic tale than the other stories that accompanied it. At the same time it does not have that excess of horror that is to be found in many other works published contemporaneously by other writers. This restraint is in itself a proof of the fact that in writing "Metzengerstein" Edgar was undertaking a literary work with a purpose and not a mere burlesque. In the final version of the story published in 1850 by Griswold, Poe again conveys the impression of making an earnest attempt at writing a traditional type of Gothic or "German" tale that was so popular at that time.

The story begins in a manner typical of all Gothic narratives with Poe trying to impart an eerie touch to what he has to say. Benjamin F. Fisher says in his famous article "Poe's 'Metzengerstein'. Not a Hoax":

The abrupt beginning of "Metzengerstein" rapidly drawing the reader into the midst of fright, high pitched emotion and sensationalism, is typical of Poe and surely not overdone. (489-490)

The setting of the story, "the interior of Hungary" is 'German' or Gothic. Details of superstition and the cryptic prophecy combine with geographic locale to inform the reader that this story is a link in the long chain of terror fiction. However, Poe tries to counteract charges of excessive "Germanism" in the 1840 preface to *Tales of*

the Grotesque and Arabesque when he says that terror was "not of Germany, but of the soul" (iii).

The character of Fredrick, Baron Metzengerstein does not show any evidence of a mocking exaggeration aiming at parody or burlesque. He is wicked, no doubt, but with a great economy of style, Poe writes that "a barrier had long since arisen in the channel of all holy thoughts and gentle recollections." He could easily step into the pages of a novel by Mrs. Radcliffe or for that matter, into the shoes of any villainous protagonist of some other Gothic tale. Like numerous other Gothic villains springing from the European nobility, Fredrick has inherited feudal magnificence. The gloomy, desolate and eerie upper chamber of his palace where he sits watching his rival's palace on fire or where he observes the mysterious design on the faded tapestry, could well have been an upper chamber in Otranto or Udolpho.

In keeping with typical Gothic conventions, Poe provides a fitting backdrop and a choice vocabulary to describe the death of the Gothic villain. The reader is informed that it was a stormy night, the Château Metzengerstein was engulfed in a "dense and livid mass of ungovernable fire" and its battlements were "crackling and rocking to their very foundations". The demon horse with the terrified Frederick on its back cleared the gateway and the moat "in a single plunge", its hooves clattered louder than the "shrieking" of the wind and the roaring of the flames and it carried the Baron into "the whist wind of hissing and chaotic fire." The setting and the words used by the writer, both add to the terror of the situation that is being described. The Gothic tradition of mystery and fear is fully realized here. But, there is an absence of gruesome details and the horrors are laid out with sparseness indicating the mild conventionality of the tale. There is nothing to indicate that Poe was exaggerating Gothic conventions in order to write a burlesque of the same. The ending of the story reinforces the basic theme of metempsychosis that runs through the story:

... a cloud of smoke settled heavily over the battlements in the distinct colossal figure of – a horse (Poe 44)

Looked at from a modern stand point, it can also be said that "Metzengerstein" is essentially like a 'dream' in the sense that dreams are reflections of our inmost frequently subconscious, feelings. At first glance, the wealthy young Baron Metzengerstein seems to be the opposite of Poe who was of a poverty stricken background. But when viewed as a dream work, the Baron becomes representative of what Poe did desire – wealth, social position and a distinguished ancestry. In dreams, it has been established, the dreamer satisfied his inmost desires. Poe had been

brought up by an unrelated rich man who often showed his contempt for Poe's family. So Poe developed a persistent desire to appear as a wealthy nobleman. In later years when he was a known figure, would-be biographers were invariably provided with details of a noble ancestry by Poe. A close examination of Metzengerstein reveals other points of similarity between Poe and his protagonist. The Baron is orphaned and his mother dies of consumption when he is in his childhood. So did Poe's. The Baron starts indulging in excess. Poe, left without the restraints of a home, had also started living a life of excess in college. There are other matching points too as, for instance, the Baron's openly expressed wish for death which can be correlated to various passages in Poe's letters. There can be no doubt that the Baron is Poe himself, projected in an unconscious dream like fashion. The Baron's behaviour can also be interpreted as a reflection of his creator's. His desire to assess himself upon his uneasy mastery of the strange horse and his final defeat and death when the horse carried him to his doom – all are shadowy reflections of Poe's, perhaps unconscious but real predilections. Poe himself was antagonistic to the world at large. The Baron's struggles to master the hostile powers lined up against him and his ultimate death symbolizes Poe's failure to actually master them. It is possible that Poe himself may have never given expression to his own fears, desires or hostilities. Perhaps he was not conscious of the exact extent of those fears, desires and hostilities. But, as in the case of dreams, they have been projected un-consciously into the tale that he has penned and "Metzengerstein" takes on a fresh significance when viewed as a 'dream-story'. The various nuances of meaning that can be read into "Metzengerstein" validate the important place that Poe's work occupies in European literary circles even though his native America sometimes hesitates to give him the top place.

The 'discovery' of the human psyche in the 19th century leads Gothic writers to exploit the possibilities put forth by the question of the double or what David Punter calls the 'Doppelgänger' that signifies "the mask of innocence". Attention moved to the horrors that lurk in our own psyche and Poe's work is in line with it. Like all other Gothic narratives, his writings reveal our inability to purge our base instincts completely from the human psyche. His "Metzengerstein" is a repository of our deepest fear – the fear that each one of us is capable of great evil.

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