Usher, Poquelin, and Miss Emily: The Progress of Southern Gothic

By Edward Stone

Some years ago Professors Brooks and Warren offered the suggestion in Understanding Fiction that we consider William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" as akin to Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" on the grounds that in both "we have a decaying mansion in which the protagonist, shut away from the world, grows into something monstrous...." But to do so, as these critics more or less admit, is to point up as many differences as similarities. Granted that each is "a story of horror": the gloomy corridors of Gothicism are too numerous for such a suggestion to prove more than initially instructive. Without losing sight of the possibilities it may offer, let us extend it and consider Faulkner's spirit-chilling little classic along the additional lines proposed more recently by Professor Randall Stewart—those of Faulkner's relationship to earlier characteristically Southern writers. In particular, let us compare "A Rose for Emily" with George Washington Cable's "Jean-ah Poquelin," to which it is more closely akin, not only in horror, but in that far more important quality defined by Professor Stewart as "a common view of the human condition." Although the situations of these two stories are curiously similar, they are productive of dissimilar results. In comparing them, along with Poe's, accordingly, we can arrive at some conclusion about the direction that Gothic fiction has taken during the past century in its concept of the human personality.

Our first finding is that, unlike "Usher," Cable's and Faulkner's are stories not only of horror, but everywhere of time and place. Cable sets this down in his first sentence and Faulkner devotes his entire long second paragraph to it. Our imaginations are thus fixed at once in both stories on an exact setting. Professor Stewart has pointed out that "a rampant industrialism was transforming the traditional social structure" of the South in the 1920's; similarly, in the years immediately following 1803, the somnolent French province of Louisiana was asked to adapt itself to the American ways of progress. "In the first decade of the present century," Cable begins, with seeming casualness; yet
upon reflection this detail becomes a most precise one: merely a decade or two later, during the flood of American immigration into New Orleans, Poquelin’s interview with the Governor would have been pathetic, rather than dramatic; and even a decade earlier, there would have been no need for it (the purchase of Louisiana in 1803 being ultimately responsible for Poquelin’s desperate situation). Similarly, the coming of garages and gasoline pumps mentioned in the beginning of Faulkner’s story places us squarely in the Jefferson of the first decades of the 1900’s—a seemingly casual fact that becomes indispensable: it was this change wrought on American life by technology that resulted in the paving of small town sidewalks and streets, which in turn brought the Yankee suitor to Jefferson. And thereby hangs Faulkner’s tale. Into both settings of change the author introduces a hero who, fortifying himself in an anachronistic, essentially horrible, and yet majestic stronghold, ignores or defies the insistent encroachments of time and progress. It is the different and yet similar ways in which Poquelin and Miss Emily oppose these encroachments that their creators show their kinship and, after all, their basic difference.

Each curtain goes up on an isolated fortress from bygone days. Jean-ah’s is seen as “an old colonial plantation-house” in New Orleans “half in ruin,” “aloof from civilization,” standing at considerable remove from the smaller, newer houses on the bank of the Mississippi. It is “grim, solid, and spiritless,” “its massive build” a reminder of an earlier, more hazardous period of American history. With its “dark” and “weather-beaten” roof and sides, it stands above a marsh in whose center grow two dead cypresses, “clotted with roosting vultures.” The Grierson home of Faulkner’s story is similarly detached, superseded, and forbidding. It is a “big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies.” It too stands alone on the street as a human dwelling, “lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores.”

In the first of these half-ruined homes lives a half-ruined old creole grandee, “once an opulent indigo planter, . . . now a hermit, alike shunned by and shunning all who had ever known him,” the last of a prominent Louisiana line. His only relative, a much younger half-brother named Jacques, has not been seen for seven years, two years after Poquelin and he left for the Guinea coast on a slave-capturing
expedition and Jean Marie returned alone. ("He must have arrived at his house by night. No one saw him come. No one saw 'his little brother'; rumor whispered that he, too, had returned, but he had never been seen again.") This livelihood Poquelin had descended to after his indigo fields had had to be abandoned, and, after that, smuggling. From the first, there is suspicion of foul play, and with the passing of time "the name of Jean Marie Poquelin became a symbol of witchery, devilish crime, and hideous nursery fictions." His society is avoided, and boys playing in the neighborhood jibe at the old man, who retaliates imperiously with violent but unheeded (and outdated) "French imprecation and invective." All avoid the house after dark. So far as anyone knows, Poquelin lives only with an old African housekeeper, a mute.

Emily Grierson is a similarly sinister relic. The last of a proud line, she lives in her outmoded stronghold, alone but peremptory in her demand for "recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson." Since her father's death she has lived all alone in the big house except for a brief period in her thirties when she went off with a Yankee construction foreman named Homer Barron, presumably to be married. Her lover has since disappeared. ("[W]ithin three days Homer Barron was back in town. A neighbor saw the Negro man admit him at the kitchen door at dusk one evening. And that was the last we saw of Homer Barron.") For a period of six or seven years, at the age of forty, Miss Emily resorts to teaching china-painting as a source of income. Then, as years pass and the fashion with it, her pupils disappear and her front door "closed upon the last one and remained closed for good." She lives on into old age in the house "filled with dust and shadows," a place associated in her townsman's eyes with an unspoken and mysterious horror. The only other inmate, we read, is an old Negro house servant, who does not utter a word during the course of the story.

Progress, in the form of municipal expansion, becomes old Poquelin's adversary. Surveyors give signs of running a new street close to his house and of draining the morass beside it. This is, we note, a Poquelin reverse that the townspeople relish; they too oppose new streets, and will welcome engineering difficulties, but their fearful scorn for Poquelin causes them to look upon his forcible return to the community with pleasure. Poquelin goes directly to the Governor, pleads with him in broken English (after the Governor understandably declines to speak in the French tongue). He pleads on the old, man-to-man
basis of the past when informality and the importance of the Poquelin name would have made this kind of interview expectable; does not take kindly to the Governor's suggestion that he deal with the city authorities; and even proposes that the Governor personally intercede with the President on his behalf. To the Governor's innocent query about the stories associated with his house, Poquelin haughtily refuses to answer, and then departs. The city official to whom the Governor has referred him also knows no French and deals with Poquelin through an interpreter. Unsuccessful here too, Poquelin swears abusively and leaves. The new street is cut through, and houses go up near Poquelin's, but still the ugly old ruin remains, to the growing exasperation of the townspeople. Now the newer arrivals plot to persuade, then coerce, the old man to build a new home. Their efforts are rebuffed firmly by Poquelin, who refuses to permit conversation about it with the president of a local Board recently organized. The townspeople renew their pressure on Poquelin and even threaten mob action (a charivari, they say); but on the fateful night they are thwarted, both by the efforts of one of their group (who, on a secret visit to the house, becomes suspicious of a revolting odor about the place, among other things) and by the death of Poquelin himself. His body is brought out of the house by the old African mute, followed by the long-missing Jacques, a leper whose existence he has successfully concealed from all for seven years. Hoisting the coffin on his shoulders, the Negro starts out toward leper soil, Jacques with him. ("[T]hey stepped into the jungle, disappeared, and were never seen again.")

Equally impervious to community pressure, Miss Emily is also menaced in the shabby majesty of her seclusion by the passing of time and by progress. She refuses for days to let the neighbors in when her father dies, and two years later scandalizes them by consorting openly with the crude Yankee, Homer Barron. The neighbors try to thwart the relationship out of mixed feelings, both of resentment at Emily's haughtiness (she is insufferably Grierson, even when fallen on evil days) and of actual sympathy with her (after all, she is one of them, as Homer is not, and the relatives whom they send for turn out to be "even more Grierson" than Emily). She defies society by refusing to identify to the druggist the purposes for which she is buying the arsenic. Shortly afterwards, when Homer apparently deserts her on the eve of their presumed wedding, and an offensive smell develops in her house, there is angry complaining to authority. But the old major
intercedes in Emily's behalf, and the only community action that results is the sprinkling of lime around her house (secretly, almost fearfully, at night). She refuses to accept free postal delivery. Finally, thirty years later, when her continued refusals to pay her taxes cause the mayor himself to write a kind letter to her proposing payment, he "received in reply a note on paper of an archaic shape, in a thin, flowing calligraphy in fading ink" airily rebuffing his proposal. This imperiousness finally causes a deputation of townspeople (mostly younger) to call on her in her dusty, sinister-smelling domain. She turns them away haughtily, claiming an immunity to taxes based on a life-long remission by a mayor long since dead, to whom she refers the deputation. When death finally comes to the old woman herself, the ancient Negro admits the first visitors to the house, then disappears ("He walked right through the house and out the back and was not seen again.") The visitors enter it for the first time in ten years, break down a door abovestairs which no one has been in in forty years, and find the long-decayed corpse of her lover lying in the bed. Only in her death is disclosed the permanence of her conquest a generation before over a man who evidently had no intention of remaining true to her.

Here, then, are two stories presenting a central conflict between a proud and doomed but indomitable last representative of an important family of a bygone era of the South and the progress of an encroaching and usurping civilization. Both Emily Grierson and Jean-Marie Poquelin perpetuate their pristine importance by immuring themselves in a massive, impregnable, outmoded house; and both successfully and secretly conceal in that house until their death a human ghoul who is all that is left to them, the success of the concealment itself recording the triumph of a figure whom time and progress have otherwise relegated to ridiculousness. With plot and characterization parallels like these one might well speculate about the extent to which Cable's story may have inspired Faulkner's. Yet there is a surprising difference in the impressions these two stories create. For, after all the parallels have been itemized, Faulkner has used old materials in an entirely new way and created an effect that is neither Poe's nor even Cable's but entirely his own. And although it is an effect that is derived from the Gothic horror effects of the preceding centuries, it is also characteristically modern and the more horrifying for that reason.

Cable's story and point of view are, after all, in the old fashion. The
mysterious and forbidding ruin superseded by time, the proud and isolated owner, a hidden horror—these are the familiar devices of Poe and his Germanic predecessors. What distinguishes "Jean-ah Poquelin" from them is the successful mixture with Gothicism of truly local color and characterization. The scene in which old Poquelin confronts the Governor of Louisiana is one of the memorable ones in American literature. And the stolid, valiant front the old man presents to his suspicious and hostile neighbors over the years, as he harbors a forbidden horror in his home at the risk of his own health, is a masterfully executed effect. Yet, though the story is sophisticated melodrama, it is melodrama. Poquelin's gloomy relic of a defunct creole colonialism, with the submarine horrors that guarantee its medieval isolation, is presented as an ugly obstacle to progress; yet, identify though we are encouraged to do with the new villas springing up around it and with the ways of that basically well-intentioned civic group, the "Building and Improvement Company" (one of whose officers, White, even becomes a secondary hero of the piece), primarily and consistently we sympathize with Poquelin and his heroic, if baffling, resistance to them. We do not willingly watch greatness, however faded, vanish from our view, and we all side against the instrument of its obliteration: as the moralist that his century required the serious writer of fiction to be, Cable had to inculcate in his readers attitudes of censure and approbation in viewing the opposing forces of the story.

Faulkner, on the other hand, impassively maintains his (and our) distance, sympathizing with and reproving in turn Emily and her adversary, the Town. The outmoded, mausoleum-like edifice from which she defies society is, to be sure, an eyesore, but to Faulkner it is merely "an eyesore among eyesores"—an unsightly dwelling in the midst of unsightly gasoline pumps. Between the boorish arrogance of Homer Barron and the cultured arrogance of Emily Grierson, can one choose? Or between the testy young alderman who does not recognize old ways and the crusty old judge who does not recognize new ones? Faulkner cares as little (or as much) for the "goss, teeming world" of the New South as he does for the one "monument" to the Old South whose identity it is effacing. His concern is not with the opposition of the forces of Good and Evil. In centering his inquiry on the workings of the morbid mind of his character, he moves beyond the terms of Cable.

Thus it is not surprising to reflect that, unlike Poe's and Cable's,
Faulkner's story is not a suspense story at all. Our chief interest in "Usher" eventually focusses on the condition of the hero's sister and our curiosity is solely on what the issue of the last horrible night will be. Almost to an equal degree Cable sets our minds to work on the mystery of Poquelin's insistence on seclusion and on the exact identity of the reported supernatural presence under his roof. Thus it is that when Poe's and Cable's living corpses at last emerge in their shrouds and the mystery of the central situational horror is solved, our minds have an answer—the lady Madeline and Jacques Poquelin had not really died—and need nothing more. Conversely, in "A Rose for Emily" not only do we early anticipate the final outcome with a fair degree of accuracy: *for this very reason* we are imbued with the horror of the heroine's personality at every step throughout the story, and thus in her case the basic mystery outlives the working out of the plot. For Faulkner, so far from withholding all clues to Homer Barron's whereabouts, scatters them with a precise prodigality; since his is a story primarily of character, it is to his purpose to saturate our awareness of Miss Emily's abnormality as he goes, so that the last six shocking words merely put the final touch on that purpose. They do not astound us or merely erase a question mark. If similarities to Faulkner are to be sought in Poe, they will be found not in "Usher," but in "A Cask of Amontillado," whose plot in no way parallels Faulkner's: both stories have a total horror, rather than a climax of horror, for in both we are given at the start a distinct impression of the moral depravity of the central figure, and the ensuing pages heighten that impression rather than merely solve for us a mystery that the opening pages have set forth. We leave Miss Emily as awed by the complexity of her being as when we met her, and therein lies the greatness of Faulkner's story.

But for the most striking evidence of the wide gulf that yawns between Faulkner and his Southern precursor Cable in horror fiction, of the two worlds in which they live, we must turn to the relationships of the two protagonists with their own dead (or living dead) and the effects these create in the reader. The strength of family ties of the Poquelin is emphasized early in Cable's story when we are told that even in old age Poquelin visits his father's tomb in St. Louis Cathedral daily. And the cost of the heart-rending tenderness with which Poquelin spends the years tending his leprous, decaying brother we have abundant evidence of; for as Cable describes him in the inter-
view with the governor, over his entire face is "the imprint of some great grief...—faint but unmistakable." It clouds and weights his days and makes each breath a burden. And we, in turn, understand and are moved.

Compare with these conventional touches the effect of Change on Miss Emily. When we first inspect her house (in her old age) we incidentally note that there is a portrait of her father "on a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace" in the parlor. But when, during her early spinsterhood, her father dies and she refuses for three days to hand his putrefying body over for burial, we are shocked by this irrational action, even though in keeping with his standpoint of non-commitment Faulkner tries to minimize it ("We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.") Even more important, by Faulkner's time it was possible for him to defy taboo by substituting a husband for a brother (or, as in Usher's case, a sister) in the concealment theme. But the most frightening detail in Faulkner's story is this: not only does this obsessed spinster continue for some years to share a marriage bed with the body of the man she has poisoned—she evidently derives either erotic gratification or spiritual sustenance (both?) from these ghastly nuptials. She becomes, in short, a necrophile or a veritable saprophytic organism; for we learn that the "slender figure in white" that was the young Miss Emily becomes, as though with the middle-aged propriety that the married state customarily brings, fat! "She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and that of parallel hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough..." It is in ghoulish inner evolutions like these that Faulkner moves beyond Poe and Cable into the twentieth century, directly into the clinic of Dr. R. von Krafft-Ebing, whose inquiries into the psychopathology of sex had revealed that

When no other act of cruelty... is practised on the cadaver, it is probable that the lifeless condition itself forms the stimulus for the perverse individual. It is possible that the corpse—a human form absolutely without will—satisfies an abnormal desire, in that the object of desire is seen to be capable of absolute subjugation, without possibility of resistance.

Not that the appearance of the hero as pathological personality in American fiction had to await the present century, to be sure. He
can be found far back in the 1800's, even in minor writers (Simms, for example), not to speak of Hawthorne (stripped of the allegorical veils) or Melville (whose Ahab is as disturbed mentally as Prince Hamlet), or, of course, Poe himself. But in "Usher" or other Poe tales the central character is patently offered to the reader and always received by him as a madman pure and simple; during the time we see him, he has never been sane; and his situation is never even remotely associable with ours—that is, with reality. Roderick Usher is, after all, a shadowy unknown living a bizarre existence in an unidentifiable land and time and suffering from pale preoccupation with a body not-dead from an equally phantasmal ailment—all details of horror for horror's sake. And only at first glance is Hawthorne's Gothic intended as much more than this. To be sure, as we meet Hepzibah Pyncheon, the "forlorn old maid in her rustling and rusty silks, with her deeply cherished and ridiculous consciousness of long descent," we are reminded of Professor Stewart's remarks on the parallels between Hawthorne's time and place and Faulkner's; and we may even be tempted to detect a foreshadowing of Miss Emily in Hepzibah, who, "though she had her valuable and redeeming traits, had grown to be a kind of lunatic, by imprisoning herself so long in one place, with no other company than a single series of ideas, and but one affection, and one bitter sense of wrong." But all this Gothic gloom is deepened only to be intruded upon later by Phoebe and Holgrave until, in the Escape into Life sequence, it is dispelled utterly, and we see that what Hawthorne has been striving towards all along is the exact reverse of Miss Emily's Escape from Life. As for Melville's Ahab, he is so much the stuff of heroes treading the boards of a Renaissance stage that we cannot consistently believe in him as a nineteenth-century sea-captain at all. Jean Marie Poquelin, to be sure, is, in terms of verisimilitude, considerably more than this. He is indeed a recognizable character with an immediate claim to our sympathy and affection. But even he was seen by Cable through the haze of three quarters of a century, he becomes alive late in life only, and only the broad outlines of his personality are set down—a striking animation but blurred as well as endeared by sentiment and melodrama.

Emily Grierson, on the other hand, not only has a local habitation and a name: she is someone we grow up and old with. In fact, Faulkner's ubiquitous and omniscient point of view seems used deliberately for this purpose at the expense of being the only intrinsic artistic flaw
in the story. Her relatives from Alabama and their relationship to the Mississippi Griersons are made much of, as are the careful distinctions between the various Protestant sects in the town. With the exception of the last ten years of her seventy-four, she is represented as living in a fairly familiar, understandable isolation for an aristocratic Souther woman, and demonstrating by the very success of her isolation the majesty and frightfulness of her position. For all that, like other Gothic characters, she is “impervious” and “perverse”—even to the point of madness—she is also “tranquil,” “inescapable,” even “dear.” “All this happened, then,” we say to ourselves at the close of her story, “in our very midst!” It happened, not in the western Germany of several centuries ago, but in the Mississippi of yesterday. Although Faulkner’s story is the “logical development” of Edgar Allan Poe, George Snell writes, it is brought to a higher degree of force since its action takes place not in some “misty mid region” but exactly and circumstantially in a recognizable South, with all the appurtenances and criticisms of a society which Faulkner knows and simultaneously hates and loves. . . . “A Rose for Emily” shows how little Faulkner has been restrained by the conventions of Southern life which have dictated to many Southern writers how little of reality they could deal with, and at the same time shows his ineluctable kinship with Poe, as technician and as master of the morbid and bizarre.

Furthermore, it would seriously detract from Faulkner’s intention and achievement to limit our identification of Emily Grierson’s pathological intransigence to the South alone. Appalling though Emily’s dealings with the North (Homer Barron) are, far more attention is given to her resistance to her own townspeople. Thus Ray B. West, Jr.’s reminder that “The theme is not one directed at presenting an attitude of Southerner to Yankee. . . . The Southern problem is one of the objective facts with which the theme is concerned, but the theme itself transcends it”; and “Here is depicted the dilemma of our age, not of the South alone nor of the North alone. . . .” How else, for that matter, are we to account for the fact that the surname of the very heroine of Faulkner’s story, so far from one of Mississippi or even Southern association, is that of none other than the officer in the Northern army who had led so celebrated and devastating a raid throughout the state of Mississippi midway through the Civil War! (And readers of Faulkner will recall how carefully he chooses names
for his characters.) In this connection, we might let Van Wyck Brooks, an eminent historian of the literary life in the United States, call our attention to the eccentricities and grotesquerie of the population, both fictional and real, of the other areas of this country during Emily Grierson’s decline—of the Midwest, of New England. What! we exclaim, emerging from a prolonged immersion in Faulkner—is this not Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi?

[It] abounded in men who had once been important and who had no life any longer to shape to their code. . . . They had set the tone for their neighbours and headed their clans. But they had no clans to lead now, and the making of laws was not for them: they were left with the “dusty ruins of their fathers’ dreams.” They had lost their confidence, as the years went by, and they crept away into their houses and grew queerer and queerer. . . . There were creepers among catacombs, “whose occupation was to die,” there were respected citizens who blew their brains out; and one saw them straggling through the town, stumbling over frozen ruts, in the cold white shine of a dreary day. In short, this population was a whole Spoon River Anthology, acting out its epitaphs in the world of the living.

Actually, the town described here is Gardiner, Maine.

We are left, then with this irony: in order to identify exactly the weird wizardry that Faulkner has achieved in “A Rose for Miss Emily,” to distinguish it chiefly from Poe’s, we must borrow a distinction that Poe claimed for himself when he insisted that his particular kind of Gothicism was “not of the Rhine but of the soul.”