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Poe's Gothic Soul in "Metzengerstein"

An Invitation to Look Inside

Elizabeth Peek

Edgar Allan Poe did not speak German. He was fluent, however, in the literary style of German gothicism. This proficiency is evident in Poe's earliest short story, "Metzengerstein: A Tale in Imitation of the German." These silver-tongued articulations of the gothic soul caused many German readers to wonder if Poe was, in fact, a German speaker. Globally, critics spotted a distinctively German sort of darkness and gloom throughout Poe's writing. Though, upon accusation of this so-called "Germanism," Poe flinched. He resisted the idea that his brand of terror was uniquely gothic or derived from any German tradition. I argue that this resistance resembles a painter's when the painter is asked if an artwork is a self-portrait; Poe's ardent denial stems from the autobiographical nature of "Metzengerstein." Although the story does not manifest as an autobiography in the classical sense, it reads as an artifact of Poe's very soul—a self-destructive, vagrant soul. "Metzengerstein" is therefore not an "Imitation of the German," but an original display of intrinsic German gothicism and an enduring invitation for authors to reach inside and write—honestly write—about what they find.

Although he was never known to set foot on German soil, Edgar Allan Poe managed to craft a lofty presence there. Echoing a romantic tradition, Poe's work flourished by way of artistic literature, as opposed to the popular educational writings in Germany during the 19th century. Rather than create affinities semantically or to the German language itself, Poe's writing finds a place in German ideology and style. Themes of romanticism, gothicism, and Germanism are certain in Poe's work. "Metzengerstein," in particular, can be diagnosed with every symptom of gothic fiction: it is based in the Middle Ages, reveling in the terrifying side of the human soul, all while featuring classical gothic elements of royalty, specters, and revenge. When reading Poe's works, the reader is "haunted continually by echoes and reminiscences of the German Romanticists," also known as "Gothics" (Gruener 2). One begins to wonder if these similarities came from Poe's study of the originals, were unintentionally absorbed from the literary atmosphere of the period, or were innately Poe. It should also be noted that while Germany may not have informed Poe's writing style, Poe greatly informed German writers. Poe embodied German romanticism, and in turn, Germans devoured his work. Poe garnered both popular and elitist attention, attracting the interest of diverse gothic writers such as "Rainer Maria Rilke, Walter Benjamin, and Ernst Junger" (Forclaz, "Poe in Europe"). According to one German author, Germans are "Poe's compatriots by birth," and Poe has become an integral part of "German education and civilization" in the study of gothic literature (Schaumann). Poe is lauded in Germany—in this particular way—because the gothic "school of German letters" had unknowingly prepared for his reception (Schaumann). Poe, a young and troubled American, was inadvertently writing and living for an entire culture, across the world.

Germans not only relish Poe's creations, but they also honor his tragic background. Poe's writing is seen as more authentic and more valuable, as it is not the only thing about him that emits a stench of terror and the fantastic—Poe's life did as well. Poe's own classical "fallen hero" persona is like a beacon of truth to many German readers (Schaumann). Germans value this authenticity and rawness of gothicism in word and deed, making Poe a "natural champion" to countless German readers and writers (Schaumann). Because Poe was translated into German as early as 1853, he may be more loved by German readers "than by his countrymen" (Forclaz, "Poe in Europe"). According to scholars, Poe is "the American

writer who is most read and discussed in Germany,” despite the fact that he never traveled there (Forclaz, “Poe in Germany” 38). Across mediums, Poe was a plentiful source of material for German artists and literary critics: “two Austrian engravers, Alfred Kubin and Hans Fronius, particularly deserve mention, Kubin having done three hundred engravings of Poe’s works,” along with the famously “perceptive 1968 critical study” of Poe’s works by literary critic Franz Link (Forclaz, “Poe in Europe”). Perhaps Poe “has always been more appreciated by German readers than by Americans” because American readers are not so apt to appreciate real horror (Forclaz, “Poe in Germany” 38). Poe’s style did not exactly resemble popular American works at the time. “Metzengerstein” did not provide the spirituality found in *Walden* or the celebration that was *Leaves of Grass*. Poe’s life might have been one of fame and wealth, had he lived in Germany, but Americans did not accept Poe’s dark offering with such warmth. Still, Poe would not mimic the authors with more hopeful sensibilities, because that was not his truth. Instead of an invented optimism, he gave himself.

Autobiographical hints at Poe drop throughout “Metzengerstein”—some clear and others hidden. Perhaps most obvious, there is the connection between Poe and the protagonist, Frederick the Baron of Metzengerstein. Frederick, like Poe, is orphaned at a young age and plagued by expectation and feelings of inadequacy. For the baron, duty is inherited in his very name because of a prophecy that the Metzengerstein house will ride upon the Berlitzing house, and yet, Frederick is preoccupied with vain acts of cruelty and violence: “the dissolute young Baron . . . disappointed every expectation” (Poe 25). In similar self-sabotaging fashion, although Poe showed great promise in school with Latin and French, he drank himself into debt and occasional incoherence; he “drank often and drank more than was good for him” (“Poe, Drugs, and Alcohol”). Poe was forced to quit school less than a year after he began because of this alcoholism. Clearly, these orphaned men seem “agitated by a variety of emotions,” which likely contributed to their eventual demise (Poe 24). Baron Frederick could not resist the seductive flames of the castle, and Edgar Allan Poe “could not refuse a drink” (“Poe, Drugs, and Alcohol”).

It is these innate masochistic behaviors in Poe and in his characters that invigorate his dark fiction even further with gothic German elements. In the “pursuit of emotional extremes, writers of the gothic

period were fascinated by experiences of pain and misery, and explored the ability to . . . produce creative energy, out of masochism” (Henderson 2). Poe presents one of these so-called “explorations” of masochism in “Metzengerstein.” The baron figuratively flogs himself with obsession. He fixates upon a horse tapestry; he is later gripped by the countenance of a real horse. This fixation twists the baron’s soul in knots, tying his fate inextricably to the equestrian demon that carries him to a fiery end. This process of descent is a “convulsive struggle,” a “contemplation of human agony,” that closely resembles Poe himself (Poe 29). The baron is drawn to self-destructive patterns, just like the man who writes him. Proving that one does not require study of the German tradition to contract a characteristically gothic strain of self-hatred.

Besides this unifying thread of self-sabotage, there are additional and subtle ties between Poe and his tale in imitation of the German that emphasize its autobiographical nature. With great care, autobiographical connections are hidden in plain sight. Poe inventively aligns himself with the world of Baron Frederick by leaving Frederick unaligned; for instance, there is no specific time period given. The events in “Metzengerstein” occur in no specified era, thus occurring in any given era. Poe claims this is because the themes of horror in “Metzengerstein” are timeless. “Why then give a date to the story I have to tell?” Poe asks (18). This displacement enforces Poe’s general flare for the bewildering and echoes the state of his own vagabond spirit. Additionally disorienting, Poe writes that the story takes place in Hungary, but the name Metzengerstein and the name of his rival—Count Wilhelm von Berlifitzing—are clearly German. Adding to its universality, the story is told from the perspective of an unnamed third-person narrator. This absence of information, again, suggests that the story exists for anyone reading. The narrator is unidentifiable, omnipresent, and unbiased. Furthermore, the conflict at the heart of “Metzengerstein” is a centuries-long rivalry between two wealthy families, so old that no one can say how far back it dates; its origins seem to depend upon an ancient prophecy: “A lofty name shall have a fearful fall when, as the rider over his horse, the mortality of Metzengerstein shall triumph over the immortality of Berlifitzing” (Poe 19). This continual lack of specificity and placement implies that the following events could occur at any time, in any place, to any person. Poe makes the linking possibilities abundant. This ambiguity functions as the

story's connective tissue: the selective vagueness connects the reader to Baron Frederick, connects Frederick to Poe, and transitively connects Poe to the reader. Terror all around.

In addition to this element of universality, which comes from Poe's ambiguity in "Metzengerstein," there comes another effect: it is apparent from this literary choice that Poe is privileging gothic themes before historical accuracies and details. The chronology and geography of "Metzengerstein" take a back seat, paling in significance when contrasted to the interior goings-on of the baron. The story vibrates in its gothic themes, coming to life with "hints at secret obsessions and sins, foreboding prophecies," and "family rivalry" (Sova 155). It is remembered more for the heights and depths of emotion its actions create, rather than the actions themselves. Clearly, Poe is more concerned with interior functions than exterior ones. As Roger Forclaz mentions in "Poe in Europe," Poe is often fixated with the condition of the soul – he and his characters are distinguished by their internal wreckage, rather than outside forces or historical context:

"The fragmentation of the self in Poe is at the core of his characters' being rather than the result of external incidents, and this fragmentation is connected with a radical treatment of the sense of space. Landscapes in Poe, as in Hawthorne and Melville, are characterized by an increasing ambiguity that casts the individual back upon himself: the result is a dark intermediary world in which terror is part and parcel of existence and intimately connected with individuality." (50–51)

The terror and division in "Metzengerstein" is no exception to this trend. The characters seem driven by an unexplained force of vengeance and doomed inexplicably, in spite of what they do. The baron is cursed with "atrocious and reckless behavior" and plagued by a "perverse attachment" to his horse (Poe 26). Poe must have felt similarly doomed, tied without consent to a generally unrequited love of poetry and literature—a life of melancholy and unfulfilled wishes. Poe himself often said he was "miserable in spite of great improvement in circumstances," unable to shake his invisible haunts ("Master of the Psychological"). Poe created and explored the atrocious inner-workings of Baron Frederick, perhaps to further understand his own darkness. Poe wrote once, in a

letter to a friend, “I am wretched, and know not why” (“Master of the Psychological”). This is truly the mark of a gothic writer, to ask questions that have no answer—to create terror for the sake of terror.

Because its source of inspiration is so mysterious, “Metzengerstein” has been a hot bed for critics and scholars to debate Poe’s true intentions. It contains all the elements of gothic horror: shadowy castles, howling winds, and seemingly supernatural phenomena. While it has been established that Poe was writing in a gothic way, loved by German readers, it is now pertinent to establish where this darkness came from. Whether Poe intended the story as a forthright tale of horror, as a parody of gothic storytelling, or as an exploration of self is a popular question. I maintain, doubtlessly, that it came about internally and—in Poe’s own words—quite “without his consciousness” (Poe 22). While it is plausible for readers to interpret the bizarre happenings in the story as the “burlesque derisions of Gothic fare,” it reads more personal than this (Sova 4). And, although the story may be a straightforward moral lesson “that evil can become so powerful that the human soul [gives] way to it and [loses] the power to resist,” and can be “drawn from the hapless rider and chained to the wild steed,” Poe was not one for moral clarity (Quinn 193). One can indeed interpret it allegorically, as events intended to demonstrate a universal truth: bad things happen to bad people, but it is unlike Poe to permit such simplicity. And finally, the story may appear as a possible work of abstract autobiography, a depiction of the horrors that go on in Poe’s own head. This seems the most fitting and human answer, because according to Poe himself, “horror and fatality have been stalking abroad in all ages” (Poe 18). This story brings horror up close, stoking a flame that hurts to look at.

Since many of the themes introduced in “Metzengerstein” are frequent in Poe’s later writing, including its general gloominess and the powers of evil, it is considered one of his most formative works. Poe published the story when he was only twenty-two years old, baffling scholars with his mastery of language and gothic horror:

Already in this first story the unity of construction and of tone, the masterly suggestion of the supernatural, the preservation of suspense, and the handling of the climax—many of the great Poe qualities—these are in “Metzengerstein.” Where before had a boy of twenty-two showed his ability in marshaling the resources of the English language to depict such a scene of terror as closes the career of Baron Metzengerstein? (Quinn 192)

It is highly significant that Poe is in his youth when writing this story. How does an untrained and adolescent author express the sentiments of an ancient sadness? How does he create, with words, the expressions of those stone gargoyles that line Gothic cathedrals? Simply put, Poe is a natural. Poe, like Baron Frederick, is sick with a fantastic “hereditary melancholy” (Poe 26). It was his gift and his punishment, to be stricken, for life, with wretchedness.

If the gothic mastery in “Metzengerstein” and Poe’s other stories was so valuable, why did he deny it? Why, in response to claims and general criticism of a German flare for the grim, did Edgar Allan Poe so intensely guard his dark tendencies? Concerning Poe’s romanticism and gothicism, some scholars assert that the bulk of Poe’s popular appeal rests upon these few striking tales of terror, like “Metzengerstein.” Yet, when Poe’s readers pointed these traits out to him, concerning his most popular “German” or “Gothic” tales, Poe answered in defense. Poe said, “Terror is not of Germany, but of the soul” (“Master of the Psychological”). In particular, I insist that terror was an exhausting attribute of Poe’s own soul. Poe believed terror was an integral part of life, and therefore a necessary topic for literature. This is why Poe’s first published tale, “Metzengerstein,” is so vital. It falls into the gothic horror genre, along with Poe’s famously frightening tales like “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat.” Poe produced horror in the face of horror, and this is how his great and terrible darkness could be conquered. Germans proudly claim him. Though Germany seems to be an indisputable upwelling for the gothic sensibilities, it poured from Poe himself.

Poe was a natural gothic writer. He created with the purpose of bringing his own terror to a larger audience and in the process, perhaps unintentionally, inspired other authors with only their own terror to give. Poe resisted German and gothic labels because his horror—although characteristically German—was internal. “Metzengerstein” is a story of gothic production, a piece of Poe that is just vague and just specific enough, ringing with the “agony of his countenance” (Poe 29). Poe insisted that art and poetry were the noblest pursuits, as they were his only relief in this life. Like a truly gothic or romantic figure, he held that the greatest art was that which had a strong effect on the senses—whether good or bad. Poe’s production of literary horror in the face of horrific circumstances was like an antidote for his own life. “Metzengerstein” is evidence that

ruthless honesty and self-sacrifice create art. What appears to be effortless Germanism is made with great effort indeed. Endeavoring writers can find a place to stay in stories like this, and all writers should try to create stories like this. This kind of writing required something huge and painful of Poe: a piece of himself. In return, he cornered readers into a shared sense of dread, if only for a moment. The best writing exacts a piece of its writer. “Metzengerstein” is a fixed enticement for those seeking to boast and anesthetize their own torment. It is a paradoxical incentive: the most self-indulgent, most sacrificial act.

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