

#01

POE
AND THE
MODERN
GROTESQUE

David Roas

Profesor Titular de Teoría de la Literatura y Literatura Comparada

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

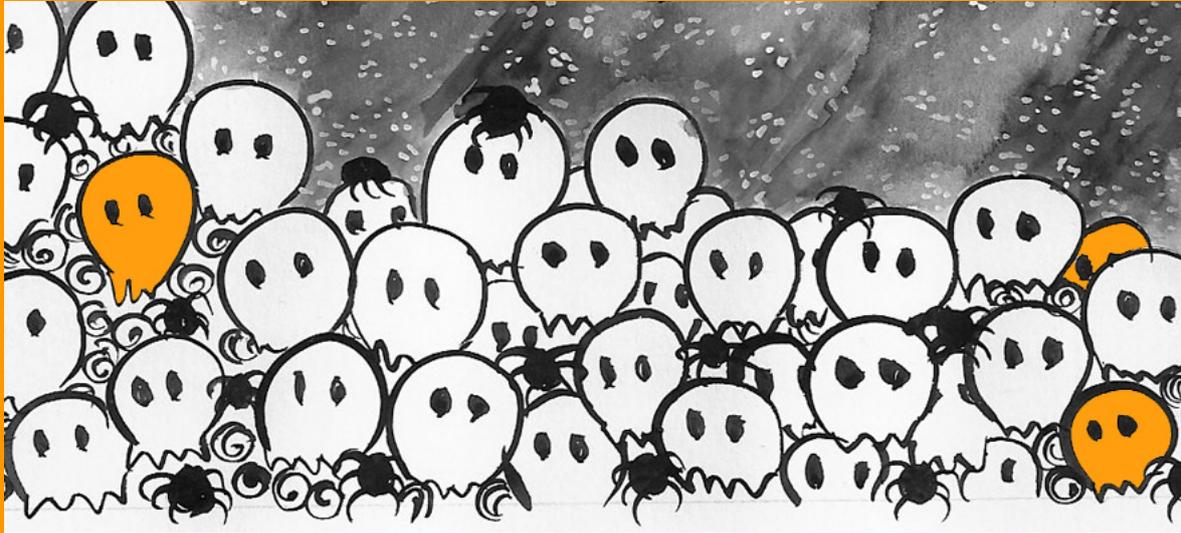
Recommended citation || Roas, David (2009) "Poe and the Modern Grotesque" [online article], 452°F. *Electronic journal of theory of literature and comparative literature*, 1, 13-27, [Consulted on: dd/mm/yy], < <http://www.452f.com/issue1/poe-y-lo-grotesco-moderno/> >.

Illustration || Mireia Martín

Translation || Paula Meiss

Article || Upon request | Received on: 23/04/2009 | Published on: 01/07/2009

License || Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 2.5 License.



Abstract || The grotesque is an aesthetic category that combines humour and the horrific (in its very different meanings). From its first carnivalesque manifestation, in which laughter had a very clear festive hue, the grotesque has been evolving towards positions where, without losing its humorous dimension, the sinister, macabre, and even horrific components gain presence. Some of Edgar Allan Poe's tales offer us an interesting embodiment of the Modern vision of the grotesque, through different objectives and forms, ranging from parody and satire to the most absurd and delirious manifestation of this category. The present analysis and commentary will also pull these tales away from the sphere of the fantastic, where some critics have wrongly placed them.

Key-words || Poe | The grotesque | Humour.

a laughter that can only occur without lungs
Kafka, *The Cares of a Family Man*

Louis Vax asserts (1960: 15) that “No se ríe ante lo grotesco de la misma manera que ante lo cómico”. And this is so because the grotesque is an aesthetic category based on the combination of the comic and the terrible, this one understood in the broad sense that includes the hideous, the horrific, the macabre, the scatological, the abhorrent or the uncanny.

That particular double dimension of the grotesque was not rightly assessed until the 19th century. Therefore, during the previous century, throughout which the first theoretical reflections on its presence and meaning in literary works¹ were published, the usual was to reduce the grotesque to a vulgar version of comedy, deeply related to the burlesque and caricatures. A good example of this is the essay by Christoph Martin Wieland *Unterredungen mit dem Pfarrer von ****, (*Conversations between W** and the Pastor of ****, 1755), where the grotesque is defined as a variant of the absurd caricature that contradicts verisimilitude, the laws of representation of the natural (the same definition Renaissance theoreticians gave of the grotesque in painting). For that reason, it awakens contradictory feelings: laughter, in the face of distortions (ridiculous exaggeration of features or facts), and aversion, due to the sinister and the hideous (against-nature) of those images.

Similar definitions appear in the works by Justus Moser, *Harlekin Oder die Verteidigung des Grotesk-Komischen* (*Harlequin or The Defence of the Grotesquely Comic*, 1761), and by Karl Friedrich Flögel, *Geschichte des Grotesk-Komischen* (*History of the Comic-Grotesque*, 1784-1787), titles that make explicit the dominant conception on the 18th century. In this sense, Moser –defending his own terrain– conceives the grotesque as a hyperbolic art, based on the reunion of the heterogeneous, and on the breaking-off of proportions (therefore its relation with the caricature) that results (positively) in laughter. Flögel, on the other hand, also insists on the breaking-off of established aesthetic canons, together with the hyperbolic dimension (especially in relation to the material and the corporeal). All this aims at provoking laughter in the audience, as a consequence of incongruity in relation to the norm. This characteristic distinguishes – according to Moser– the grotesque from the satire, comic mode that takes advantage from the corrective power of laughter to perform a critical, didactic and moralizing task on human vices and defects².

From this perspective, the grotesque is conceived as a minor genre, related to the caricature (as proposed by Wieland). This would explain

NOTES

1 | The first theoretical analyses on the use and meaning of the grotesque were carried out in the field of art, since it was born as an ornamental painting style. So, Vasari, in *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori scultori e architetti* (1550), casted an unfavourable opinion while qualifying it as “una spezie di pittura licenziosa e ridicola molto”. Several other similar approaches followed this one. Daniele Barbaro comment on *De architectura* (I b.C.) by Vitruvio (1556) stands out, where he qualifies the grotesques as *sogni dei pittori* (a mimic to the Horatian expression to qualify the artist’s imagined monsters as “sick people’s dreams); in *Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de’ pittori circa l’istorie* (1564), Gilio da Fabriano states that the finto (the feigned) is that which is not but could be (it is plausible), while the favoloso (fabulous) is that which is not and cannot be, and must therefore be excluded from art; to mention one more, the *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane* (1582), by Cardinal Paleotti, warns us about the danger of grotesque images, as they allow the soul to access images that are “bugiardi, inertí, vani, imperfetti, inverosimili, sproporzionati, oscuri e stravangti”. On Renaissance theories of the grotesque, see Chastel (1988) y Morel (1997).

2 | Not a very good choice for a vision, since 18th century literature offers interesting examples of grotesque works, with obvious satirical aims. Just think about Laurence Sterne or the masterly work by Jonathan Swift *A Modest Proposal For Preventing The Children of Poor People in Ireland From Being Aburden to Their Parents or Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to The Public* (1729), in which the author proposes a delirious solution to the problem of hunger in Ireland: to eat

to a great extent the emphasis placed throughout this century on the ridiculous and extravagant components, to the detriment of the terrifying and/or scatological.

With the dawn of Romanticism, the grotesque becomes not only an aesthetic category, but also a sign of modernity, an expression of a new world vision. As Rosen asserts (1991:45), the Romantics are driven by the pressing need to think about their own aesthetic activity, and this helps them re-discover the grotesque in relation to their current, very alive, concerns:

A ce titre il y a tout lieu de considérer le grotesque comme une invention des romantiques, et de la tenir pour une idée radicalement neuve. Le projet de concevoir ce que l'on pourrait considérer comme un métadiscours pour la modernité est sans commune mesure avec celui de penser, à la même enseigne et avec quelque rigueur, ce qui s'est au fil des ans plus ou moins aggloméré dans un même domaine. D'ailleurs c'est précisément parce qu'il y a là un flou persistant que l'invention peut se donner libre cours. Parce que rien de ce qui concerne désormais le grotesque n'est véritablement fixé, parce que de nouvelles adjonctions à ce champ, en amont aussi bien qu'en aval, demeurent possibles, la marge de manoeuvre semble bien assez large pour une élaboration notionnelle en prise directe sur de très puissants intérêts.

German Romanticism provide some of the first fundamental reflections on the grotesque, in which it is related to the categories of beauty and the sublime. Therefore, Friedrich Schlegel defines the grotesque in his *Athenaeum* (vol. I, 1798; *Fragmentos*, 75, 305, 389) as “el contraste pronunciado entre forma y argumento, la mezcla centrífuga de lo heterogéneo, la fuerza explosiva de lo paradójico, que son ridículos y al mismo tiempo producen horror” (quoted by Kayser, 1957: 60). As we can see, Schlegel emphasizes the two elements that will always be considered basic in the construction of the grotesque: the comic and the horrific (or disturbing). Likewise, it should be considered that for Schlegel the grotesque designates a new stadium for art, knowledge and the world, marked by the seal of dissonance and heterogeneity³.

Jean Paul, in his *Vorschule zur Aesthetik (Introduction to Aesthetics, 1804)*, also insists on those two features as defining the Romantic grotesque. What should be noted is that Jean Paul never uses the word “grotesque”, but “cruel humour”, a humour he considers is aimed at the perfect finished world. It is a negative humour, “satanic” (as Baudelaire will express it later).

After the German Romantics, it will be the French who carry on with the fundamental restoration of the grotesque, by placing this category at the centre of the debate on modern art. However, in many occasions they will not pay much attention to the elements and

NOTES

a part of the many children born to the Catholic families.

3 | See also Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1978).

effects that characterize the grotesque (laughter and horror), while favouring other aspects –above all the hybridism of genres and the breaking-off of established rules– as basis of a much more general aesthetic reflection.

The most representative text of this period is, without a doubt, the famous *Préface* to the play *Cromwell* (1827), by Victor Hugo, considered the French Romantic manifesto, in which the author aims at “bouleverser l’ordre des préséances, annoncer un nouveau règne et une nouvelle législation, celle de l’art ‘moderne’” (Rosen, 1991: 52). Hugo restores the grotesque as one of the aesthetic categories that define Modern Romantic art, conceived as a union of opposite items: in art there is no separation between beauty and ugliness, laughter and tears, good and evil, as it happens in life where everything is part of a common totality. True poetry, according to Hugo, total poetry consists in the harmony of opponents. In other words, a kind of poetry free of the rigid Classical rules (genre, tone, style...) is vindicated. For Hugo, the grotesque is an expression of Modernity.

After the Romantic period, the first great theory on the concept and meaning of the grotesque as an aesthetic category appears: *De l’essence du rire et généralement du comique dans les arts plastiques* (1855), by Charles Baudelaire. In contrast with the vague formulation proposed by Hugo, Baudelaire carries out the systematic study of the notion of the grotesque. It should also be mentioned that this study is on occasions deliberately confuse, and its objective also implies a much wider framework, as it involves the conception of Modern art and artists.

Through his line of argument, Baudelaire starts with one of the essential theories on laughter: that of superiority, already put forward by Plato and Aristotle. As the French writer points out, when we laugh at someone who trips over something on the street, we do it out of a feeling of superiority over the affected one (it did not happen to us); at the same time, though, laughing at someone else’s expense is a sign of weakness. For that reason, Baudelaire says, this laughter is “satanic”. Here it is possible to find what Bozal (2001: 57) considers the central point in Baudelaire’s thesis: the “world’s point of view”. When radically assuming this perspective, he breaks with the tradition of the moral-humour. Without destroying it, he puts it on a different perspective, a mundane one. This makes Baudelaire distinguish between the *absolute-comic* (the grotesque) and the *significant-comic* (the ordinary humour).

The absolute-comic is creative, from an artistic point of view, while the *significant-comic* is simply based on the imitation of human customs.

Following Bozal's terminology (2001: 57), the significant-comic would have a trans-worldly purpose (and therefore, a useful one), while the absolute-comic adopts the "world's point of view":

en lo grotesco se descoyunta la razonable normalidad de la apariencia, y en tal descoyuntarse asoma la naturaleza, nuestra naturaleza, pero ahora no con la grandeza que había sido propia de lo sublime: lo grotesco corroe la sublimidad. Es lo insoportable de la naturaleza que somos, que nos puede, la causa –y a la vez la expresión– del exceso propio de lo grotesco. El exceso permite hablar de lo cómico feroz que estaba en Rabelais, que está en Goya, que se atisba en algunas caricaturas de Daumier. La risa satánica es contradictoria, pone en pie tanto la grandeza como la miseria infinitas. De esta forma se invierte lo sublime y se contempla el sujeto como un absoluto negativo que carece de cualquier otra posibilidad de redención que no sea la risa: y, puesto que no existe otra redención, por eso ríe. (Bozal, 2001: 58)

It is possible to interpret, then, that the world created by the grotesque is not a literal imitation of daily life, but another world. This does not imply a lack of relation between them: what Baudelaire seems to be stating is that under the grotesque distortion we can find our true nature, both ridiculous and horrible at the same time.

Baudelaire notices that the grotesque was already present in Rabelais or Molière, but in their fantasies there still underlies something useful and reasonable, which radically differentiates them from the Modern grotesque. This one only verifies the world's distortion and expresses itself through satanic laughter.

Among Edgar Allan Poe's narrative works several grotesque tales stand out. They exactly reflect the vision proposed by Baudelaire. In them, the American author skilfully combines the macabre (even the horrific) with the comic, to offer a distorted vision of the world and the human being.

It is meaningful that Poe should have used the term grotesque in the title of his first book of tales: *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840), the prologue of which also asserts that "The epithets 'Grotesque' and 'Arabesque' will be found to indicate with sufficient precision the prevalent tenor of the tales here published". To this he adds that the twenty-five chosen tales have a common unity and atmosphere⁴. And this is so –we can deduce– because in both categories he perceives a common willingness to distort and transgress the perception of the real and the individual, even though their effects will be different. For Poe (as for Baudelaire), the *grotesque* rests on the amalgamation of the comic and the horrific, while the *arabesque* has to do with what he describes in the prologue as "phantasy-pieces", i.e. what we now define as "fantastic short stories". This concept is, without a doubt, a borrowing of the German concept of *Fantasiestücke*

NOTES

4 | The tales included in the first edition of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* are the following: "Morella", "Lionizing", "William Wilson", "The Man that was Used Up", "The Fall of the House of Usher", "The Duc de l'Omelette", "Manuscript Found in a Bottle", "Bon-Bon", "Shadow", "The Devil in the Belfry", "Ligeia", "King Pest", "The Signora Zenobia" and "The Scythe of Time" (these two later merged into one tale: "How to Write a *Blackwood* Article"), on the first volume; "Epimanes" (later on reshaped into "Four Beasts in One"), "Siope" (re-titled "Silence –A Fable"), "Hans Pfall", "A Tale of Jerusalem", "Von Jung" (later, "Mystification"), "Loss of Breath", "Metzengerstein", "Berenice", "Why the Little Frenchman Wears his Hand in a Sling", "The Visionary" (later "The Assigination") and "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion", on the second volume.

(‘phantasies’, ‘phantasy pieces’) that E.T.A. Hoffmann used for the title of his first collection of stories: *Fantasiestücke in Callots Manier* (1813-1815)⁵. This title also combines references to the fantastic and the grotesque, because Jacques Callot was a 17th century illustrator and painter, famous for his *gobbi*, caricatures of crippled characters, with deformed bodies and extravagant gestures.

Poe again put these two terms together, in the description of the extravagant costumes of the characters in the central scene of his tale “The Masque of Red Death” (1842), a fact that reveals the significant connection that the author perceived between both categories:

Be sure they were grotesque. There were much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm – much of what has been since seen in “Hernani.” There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust. (*Complete Tales*, 452)

The reference to Victor Hugo’s drama ends up being extremely revealing in the light of what I have exposed in the previous pages. It coincides with the French author’s statement that the grotesque is a merger of opposites.

Poe makes use of the grotesque in many of his tales, although with different objectives, ranging from parody and satire (either political, literary or social), as we can see on “King Pest” (1835), “How to write a *Blackwood Article*” (1838), “Never Bet the Devil your Head” (1841), “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Feather” (1844) and “Some Words with a Mummy” (1845), to the most distorted and absurd incarnation of the grotesque hyperbole, as in “Loss of Breath” (1832), “The Man that was Used Up” (1839) and “The Angel of Odd” (1844), texts that become almost a pre-figuration of Kafka’s narrations or Grosz’ engravings. A separate remark should be done for “Hop-Frog” (1849), a tale in which Poe reflects explicitly the change implied in the Modern grotesque in contrast with its carnivalesque (medieval and Renaissance) incarnation, so much praised by Bakhtin (1965). In this tale, as we will see, the festive Rabelaisian laughter, gives way to a sinister humour, sign of the new times.

That transformation of the grotesque connects in turn with one of manners in which humour in general evolved during Modernity: through the promotion of the sinister and the macabre. As Grojnowski (1990) notices, “Le déplacement des tabous remodèle l’aire des transgressions et transforme les raisons de rire” (p. 453), which explains that, at the end of the 19th century, the most fertile leanings of humour are “la dérision, l’humour noir, le non-sens, la mystification,

NOTES

5 | Significantly, it is from this German term –as Castex (1951: 5-8) explains– that the critic Jean-Jacques Ampère created the expression “contes fantastiques” (against the equivocal and rather vague “fantaiesies”) in an article on Hoffmann’s works that he published in 1828 on *Le Globe* (when his work begun to be translated into French). This expression ended up imposing and adapting itself to the different European languages on the 19th century (on the origin and usage of the term “fantastic short story” see also Roas 2006a: 116-121).

l'indécidable" (455). According to Grojnowski, the "humour noir" emerges from the *Contes cruels* by Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, and the *Histoires désobligeantes* by Léon Bloy. Revealingly enough, Villiers himself asserts in relation to his *Tribulat Bonhomet*: "Le rire qui court ces pages inquiète parfois et donne le frisson" (459). In these same years, Huysmanns, after publishing *À rebours*, speaks about "éclats de rires sinistres" and "humour noir", a label that owes its later fortune to the *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1939), by André Breton.

In his reflection on the most sinister manners of humour, Grojnowski relies on Hugo's theses on the grotesque: as I have already mentioned according to the French poet, the grotesque becomes involved with the sublime to offer a complete representation of the real. This conception refutes the framework of classical poetics, according to which the comic and the tragic are mutually exclusive. From that moment onwards, theoreticians on the comic have never stopped stressing the principle of discordant signification (the incongruity). All this allows Grojnowski to state that "[the 'Modern' comic] procède d'une vision des choses où le bien et le mal, le noir et le blanc se confondent. Cette indétermination traduit non un cécité mais une indifférence, une incroyance ou une désespérance" (p. 466). Therefore, modern humour is aimed at recipients who accept its dark and disconcerting part. This can help us understand the evolution itself of grotesque laughter.

Poe's tale "Loss of Breath" (1832) offers a paradigmatic example of everything I am exposing. The story's starting point is an impossible event (supernatural) that, instead of disturbing the reader, provokes their hilarity and surprise. The tale is narrated by its protagonist, Mr. Lackobreath, and refers how he loses his breath due to an argument with his wife, but this does not imply his death. After unsuccessfully looking out for it around his house, he decides that the best would be to leave his wife, city and friends, his everyday life, since he has become a stranger, a monster:

alive, with the qualifications of the dead –dead, with the propensities of the living – an anomaly on the face of the earth – [...] a calamity calculated, even more than beggary, to estrange the affections of the multitude, and to draw down upon the wretch the well-merited indignation of the virtuous and the happy. (*Complete Tales*, 44, 46)

Before he runs away, he rehearses a guttural sound that will allow his oral expression. Once achieved, he starts his journey and a series of delirious adventures take place. The first one occurs in the carriage he takes to leave town: squashed between two obese men, he suffers the dislocation of several bones. This, together with his following passing out and his evident lack of breath, becomes an evident symptom of his death for the rest of the travellers. Instead of

stopping the vehicle and looking out for help, they decide to throw him out in front of a tavern. The owner picks him up, and still believing him a corpse (he is still unconscious), sells him to a surgeon. The surgeon cuts his ears off, and a friend druggist applies galvanic discharges on him. While he is lying on the dissection table, two cats fight over the possession of his nose. Invigorated by pain, and attempting to escape from the doctor's room, he throws himself out of the window. Unfortunately enough, he lands on the cart that is used to transport a murderer to the gallows; in the confusion, the murdered runs away, and the protagonist is hanged instead (they are very much alike). The hanging helps him with the dislocated neck. To "give the crowd the worth of their trouble", he offers an overwhelming sight:

My convulsions were said to be extraordinary. My spasms it would have been difficult to beat. The populace encored. Several gentlemen swooned; and a multitude of ladies were carried home in hysterics.
(*Complete Tales*, 51)

As we can see, everything becomes more and more absurd and nonsensical, until the end of the story, where the grotesque hyperbole reaches its maximum: in the cemetery, the protagonist escapes from his coffin and finds a man, affected by another strange disease: he has double breath. It happens to be his neighbour Mr. Windenough, who had walked by the protagonist's window on the day he quarrelled with his wife, and involuntarily caught his breath. So, "Preliminaries being at length arranged, my acquaintance delivered me the respiration; for which (having carefully examined it) I gave him afterward a receipt" (56). The tale finishes with both characters leaving the cemetery, with their original nature recomposed.

I avoid here the repetition of Marie Bonaparte's psychoanalytical interpretation (1933) –its contents being easily intuited by the reader (just one clue: according to the author, the loss of breath consists of Poe's unconscious confession of his loss of sexual prowess)–, since it does not take into account an element that I find fundamental to understand one of the essential objectives of the American writer when composing his tale: the original subtitle being "A Tale Neither In nor Out of Blackwood". This makes evident the clear intention to parody (through grotesque distortion) the macabre and necrophilia stories that used to be published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, of great success at the time. A letter from Poe himself to John P. Kennedy (February 11th 1836) confirms this idea: "Lionizing" and "Loss of Breath" were satires properly speaking – at least so meant – the one of the rage for Lions and the facility of becoming one – the other of the extravagancies of *Blackwood*" (Walter, 1995: 532, n. 51).

However, the obvious parodic intention does not exhaust the meaning of the tale. What we see represented in that grotesque story is the world upside down, a reality that becomes illogical and caricaturesque. This is so, not only because the protagonist loses his breath and is still alive (the same will happen with another character when he loses his head, as we will see), but also because of his reaction that assumes his new state and tries to adapt to it. As Todorov (1970: 78) asserts in relation to another masterly grotesque story, also related to mutilation –“The nose” (1835), by Nicolai Gógol–, Poe’s text is pure incarnation of the absurd: as well as the world depicted itself (ours), the interpretation of the tale also escapes any possible attempt to subject it to a rational logic.

Poe played with grotesque mutilation of the human body in other of his tales: “How to write a *Blackwood Article*” (1838), “The Man that was Used Up” (1839) and “Never Bet the Devil your Head” (1841)⁶.

In the second part of the first of these tales, entitled “A Predicament”, Poe parodies again –as he did in “Loss of Breath”– the ridiculously macabre stories published in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine. He also constructs, through the female narrator, a completely delirious scene: after being beheaded, the protagonist is not only still alive, but also narrating this topsy-turvy experience from a double perspective that combines the separate perceptions of body and head, causing a grotesque duplication of the character:

My senses were here and there at one and the same moment. With my head I imagined, at one time, that I, the head, was the real Signora Psyche Zenobia -- at another I felt convinced that myself, the body, was the proper identity. To clear my ideas on this topic I felt in my pocket for my snuff-box, but, upon getting it, and endeavoring to apply a pinch of its grateful contents in the ordinary manner, I became immediately aware of my peculiar deficiency, and threw the box at once down to my head. It took a pinch with great satisfaction, and smiled me an acknowledgement in return. Shortly afterward it made me a speech, which I could hear but indistinctly without ears. I gathered enough, however, to know that it was astonished at my wishing to remain alive under such circumstances. (“A Predicament”, *Complete Tales*, 218)

Poe places us on the domain of the grotesque hyperbole, where exaggeration, unlikelihood and absurd have an evident humorous intention. This is combined with the macabre dimension of a phenomenon that, in other kind of tales, would have generated and obvious fantastic effect: just think about the un-homely impression provoked by the headless rider in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1819), by Washington Irving. Nevertheless, in Poe’s tale, the image of a headless and animated body generates the grotesque double effect of laughter and abhorrence (as with the different adventures of the “Loss of Breath” protagonist)⁷. Another turn of the screw for the

NOTES

6 | The mutilation motive must have obsessed Poe, since he revisited it –in different forms and meanings– in many of his fantastic and horror tales “Berenice” (the protagonist’s husband removes her corpse’s teeth), “The Murders of the rue Morgue” –the corpses of two women appear horribly mutilated: “la anciana señora [...] había sido tan degollada tan salvajemente, que al tratar de levantar el cuerpo, la cabeza se desprendió del tronco”, (*Cuentos completos*, 352)–, “The Black Cat” (the protagonist pulls his cat’s eye off with a knife), etc

grotesque: the idea of a headless and animated body can generate laughter in those watching it. This effect is exploited by some gore films, such as *Re-Animator* (1986), by Stuart Gordon (free version of Lovecraft's short story, "Herbert West, Reanimator"), where the life of a headless body and that of its head (on a tray) ends up being hilarious and not at all horrific, due to the parodic and hyperbolic treatment of the scene. What would otherwise be terrible becomes humorous here (without losing its distressing and disgusting dimensions) thanks to the incongruity.

Something similar happens in "The Man that was Used Up" (1839). This tale is centred on the fascination that the handsome and brave honorary general John A.B.C. Smith provokes on the protagonist. This fascination becomes horror when he discovers the real aspect of Smith when he can finally meet him. When he enters General Smith's room, the narrator tells us that "There was a large and exceedingly odd looking bundle of something which lay close by my feet on the floor, and, as I was not in the best humor in the world, I gave it a kick out of the way." ("The Man that was Used Up", *Complete Tales*, 240). Then he realises that the amorphous shape is in fact the heroic general, who becomes human again when he puts on –with the help of his butler– the artificial members that substitute for the ones he lost in war: a leg, an arm, the shoulders, chest, hair, teeth, an eye, the palate and tongue. The title describes literally the impossible state of the character. This is grotesque hyperbole at its best, not to mention its inevitable satiric charge against the banality and emptiness of social usages and behaviours.

This playing with the supernatural and the horrific has led some critics to consider these tales fantastic. If we examine their working, and above all, their effect, we can prove the mistake in such a statement. Even though we find those supernatural elements, what those tales actually pretend is to distort the limits of reality, transforming them in caricatures. This is done not to provoke the restlessness that characterises the fantastic, but to provoke the reader's laughter, while they negatively impress the reader through the monstrous, macabre, sinister or disgusting character of the situations represented. Laughter establishes what we could call a "security distance" in the face of the supernatural, which detracts from the possible fantastic effect of the tale. On the contrary, the fantastic places us initially inside the world as we know it, the world that we (let's say it like this) control, to immediately break it with a phenomenon that alters the natural and usual manner in which that everyday world works. This makes that phenomenon impossible, and as such, inexplicable. However, in the narration everything is organised to finally assume the fantastic phenomenon as an effective presence, as something "possible", which implies a transgression of our usual world, of our

NOTES

7 | Something similar happens in Benito Pérez Galdós' "¿Dónde está mi cabeza?" (1892): someone wakes up one day without his head and narrates us the efforts to find it. See also Roas [2008].

idea of the real⁸. The grotesque, instead, reveals the true face of that world: chaotic, ridiculous and meaningless.

I mentioned before that these tales of Poe's reflect very clearly the step from the carnivalesque grotesque to the modern grotesque, from festive laughter to sinister humour. For Bakhtin (1965), in carnival there is no place for pure denial, since degradation is always fertile; blood becomes wine, as in the Rabelaisian episodes he analyses in his book. This would explain that there is no fear of life or death, which is defeated by happy and liberating carnivalesque laughter. Therefore, laughter in Bakhtin's model is a degrading principle but always ambivalent: it lowers and materialises the elevated, the ideal, the sublime, the spiritual, the horrific. All those forces capable of subjugating and horrifying human beings, be it earthly or superhuman authorities, even death itself, lose their power and become "espantapájaros cómicos" (Bakhtin, 1965: 51). Carnival laughter is always popular and universal. Everybody laughs and they laugh about everything.

On the contrary, the universe of the Romantic (modern) grotesque promotes the sinister and the horrific: the world stops being something usual and reassuring, and becomes a chaotic, absurd and alien entity. All this should not be understood as Kayser (1957) does. His theories have signalled much of the subsequent reflections on the modern grotesque: the German critic favours in excess the horrific dimension, to the detriment of the always necessary comic side of the grotesque. In many occasions he forgets about laughter, and defines the grotesque as if it was the fantastic.

Even though the modern grotesque is the sinister expression of a deranged, remote world, where the familiar becomes strange, the resulting image is always humorous and horrific in one go. If one of those two faces disappears, we abandon the domains of the grotesque and enter those of neighbouring categories: the fantastic, the horrific, the absurd, black humour...

This evolution of the grotesque is perfectly represented in one of the most disturbing tales of Poe's: "Hop-Frog" (1849). Set in the court of Charles IV, Poe creates characters and scenery that we could –apparently– qualify as carnivalesque, in the best Rabelaisian tradition. To make this connection more evident, even the name of the French writer is mentioned on describing the king: "He would have preferred Rabelais' 'Gargantua' to the 'Zadig' of Voltaire: and, upon the whole, practical jokes suited his taste far better than verbal ones." (*Complete Tales*, 945). The shadow of Rabelais is also perceived in the caricaturesque construction of the king and his

NOTES

8 | This is the idea of the fantastic that I stand for, and which I have exposed in different papers of theoretical character: see also Roas (2001), (2004), (2006b) and (2009).

courtiers as fat and joking beings. This is as far as the similarities go. The tale soon reveals that all of them actually lack the funny vitality of Rabelaisian bodies. They are horrific, evil beings who enjoy torturing and humiliating poor Hop-Frog, a midget joker, lame and deformed. This hackneyed image is also initially related to the carnivalesque grotesque tradition.

As Iehl warns us (1997:71), the king uses the fool not to associate him to the community of laughter (following Bakhtin's expression), but to crush him with his power. This will justify the final meaning of the tale, and above all, the change from the festive grotesque to the sinister grotesque. To avenge the humiliation he has suffered (they have got him drunk, mocked his relation with midget Trippetta), Hop-Frog plots a horrible joke. He convinces them to dress up as orang-utans, to present them to the court as real animals. Everybody is delighted with the idea, assuming the joke will be really funny. To do so, Hop-Frog covers their bodies with tar and flax, and chains them. When presented in public, their image is so realistic that provokes panic scenes (some ladies even pass out). Then, Hop-Frog raises the chain with a tackle, and leaves them hanging in the air. Immediately afterwards, he sets them on fire and runs away from the palace with Trippetta: "The eight corpses swung in their chains, a fetid, blackened, hideous, and indistinguishable mass." (Complete Tales, 955).

That "last jest", as Hop-Frog himself calls it, has nothing to do with the carnivalesque masquerade, where everybody laughs festively, as Bakhtin says. What Poe is showing us, through Hop-Frog's wit, is the true and terrible faces of human beings and the society we inhabit. The playing with the orang-utan costumes makes the animal character literal, the inhumanity of king and court are evident. Less than a century afterwards, Valle-Inclán will construct in his theater of the grotesque animalised beings, moving around like puppets, rag dolls and marionettes. He will promote the distorted exaggeration of their physical and psychic features, in consonance with the distortion of the world. That is why laughter goes hand in hand with restlessness.

In conclusion, the aforementioned tales of Poe's –even though they have different objectives– coincide in providing the reader with a distorted and caricaturesque image of reality (much more sinister than the upside-down world of the carnivalesque grotesque). This functions as a metaphor of the modern idea of the world and the human being as a caotic, ridiculous and meaningless entities. As I have mentioned, the characters in these stories are always turned into rag dolls and puppets, so that when we contemplate the other as an object, we take a distance and become aware of our superiority,

and laugh. However, as Bozal warns us (2001: 71), that feeling of superiority and/or distance only lasts the short time it takes us to realise that in fact those *others* are ourselves, that that other world is only a distorted reflection of ours.

Works Cited

- BAJTIN, Mijail (1965): *La cultura popular en la Edad Media y el Renacimiento. El contexto de François Rabelais*, Madrid, Alianza, 1988.
- BAUDELAIRE, Charles (1855): *De la esencia de la risa y en general de lo cómico en las artes plásticas, Lo cómico y la caricatura*, Madrid, A. Machado Libros, 79-117.
- BONAPARTE, Marie (1933): *Edgar Poe. Étude psychoanalytique*, París, Denoël et Steele, 2 vols.
- BOZAL, Valeriano (2001): "Cómico y grotesco", Ch. Baudelaire, *Lo cómico y la caricatura*, Madrid, A. Machado Libros, 13-77.
- CASTEX, Pierre-Georges (1951): *Le conte fantastique en France de Nodier à Maupassant*, París, José Corti.
- CHASTEL, André (1988): *El grotesco*, Madrid, Akal, 2000.
- GROJNOWSKI, Daniel (1990): "Le rire 'moderne' à la fin du XIXe siècle", *Poétique*, 84, 453-469.
- IEHL, Dominique (1997): *Le Grotesque*, París, PUF.
- KAYSER, Wolfgang (1957): *Lo grotesco. Su configuración en pintura y literatura*, Buenos Aires, Nova, 1964.
- LACOUÉ-LABARTHE, Philippe, y J.L. NANCY (1978): *L'absolut littéraire. Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand*, París, Seuil.
- MOREL, Philippe (1997): *Les grotesques. Les figures de l'imaginaire dans la peinture italienne de la fin de la Renaissance*, París, Flammarion.
- POE, Edgar Allan (2009): *Cuentos completos*, Barcelona, Edhasa.
- ROAS, David (2001): "La amenaza de lo fantástico", David Roas (ed.), *Teorías de lo fantástico*, Madrid, Arco/Libros, 7-44.
- ROAS, David (2004): "Contexto sociocultural y efecto fantástico: un binomio inseparable", en Ana María Morales y José Miguel Sardiñas (eds.), *Odiseas de lo fantástico*, México, Coloquios Internacionales de Literatura Fantástica, 39-56.
- ROAS, David (2006a): *De la maravilla al horror. Los inicios de lo fantástico en la cultura española (1750-1860)*, Vilagarcía de Arousa, Mirabel Editorial.
- ROAS, David (2006b): "Hacia una teoría sobre el miedo y lo fantástico", *Semiosis* (México), 3, 95-116.
- Roas, David (2008): "En los límites de lo fantástico: el cuento grotesco a finales del siglo XIX", Montserrat Amores y Rebeca Martín (eds.), *Estudios sobre el cuento español del siglo XIX* Vigo, Editorial Academia del Hispanismo, 203-222.
- ROAS, David (2009): "¿Hay literatura fantástica después de la mecánica cuántica? Nuevas perspectivas teóricas", Amelia Sanz Cabrerizo (ed.), *Teoría literaria española con voz propia* Madrid, Arco/Libros, 171-189.
- ROSEN, Elisheva (1991): *Sur le grotesque. L'ancien et le nouveau dans la réflexion esthétique*, Saint-Denis, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes.
- TODOROV, Tzvetan (1970): *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, París, Editions du Seuil.
- VAX, Louis (1960): *L'Art et la littérature fantastique*, París, PUF.
- WALTER, George (1995): *Poe*, Madrid, Anaya & Mario Muchnik.