“I Turn the Picture’s Face”: George MacDonald’s Poem “The Haunted House”

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Combining elements of the Gothic ballad, phantastic poetry, and theological-didactic verse, George MacDonald’s poem “The Haunted House,” written in 1872-73, appears as a multi-layered poetical construct. In addition there are inter-medial references to the picture The Haunted House by the American landscape painter Thomas Moran, which in turn was heavily influenced by Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). A meta-fictional reading, however, appears to be the most promising. MacDonald’s poem, oscillating between tradition and innovation, uses major elements of the (dark) romantic tradition of landscape description while utilising the central principle of Symbolism: oblique allusion. All in all, the poem manifests the emergence of the scepticism concerning language and poetry which was to be rife during the 1900s. MacDonald’s spook-house is thus a poetological reflection, a haunted house of poetry.

The title of George MacDonald’s poem “The Haunted House” is deceptive, perhaps deliberately so. It seems to intend purposely to avoid a definitive interpretation. This impression, persisting even after several readings, is ultimately caused by the reader’s expectations being constantly frustrated. In this poem, MacDonald plays with several things: with the traditional motif of the haunted house, that is, of the house which is visited by the supernatural, or numinous; with the reader and his mood of expectation; and with the lyric mood as such. Besides these elements, this artistically handled poem deals with inter-medial connections between literature and the visual arts, and with hidden inter-textual relationships between prose and the lyric. Above all, “The Haunted House” is an exceptionally rich and exciting poem because in it the author (hardly known as a lyric poet) undertakes the seldom-dared attempt to convey in poetry the principle of the fantastic.

The Haunted House
This must be the very night!
The moon knows it!—and the trees!
They stand straight upright,

Each a sentinel drawn up,
As if they dared not know
Which way the wind might blow!
The very pool, with dead gray eye,
Dully expectant, feels it nigh,
And begins to curdle and freeze!
And the dark night,
With its fringe of light,
Holds the secret in its cup! [end of page 1]

II  What can it be to make
The poplars cease to shiver and shake.
And up in the dismal air
Stand straight and stiff as the human hair
When the human soul is dizzy with dread—
All but those two that strain
Aside in a frenzy of speechless pain,
Though never a wind sends out a breath
To tunnel the foggy rheum of death?
What can it be has power to scare
The full-grown moon to the idiot stare
Of a blasted eye in the midnight air?
Something has gone wrong;
A scream will come tearing out ere long!

III  Still as death,
Although I listen with bated breath!
Yet something is coming, I know—is coming!
With an inward soundless humming
Somewhere in me, or if in the air,
I cannot tell, but it is there!
Marching on to an unheard drumming,
Something is coming—coming—
Growing and coming!
And the moon is aware,
Aghast in the air
At the thing that is only coming
With an inward soundless humming
And an unheard spectral drumming!

IV  Nothing to see and nothing to hear!
Only across the inner sky
The wing of a shadowy thought flits by,
Vague and featureless, faceless, drear—
Only a thinness to catch the eye:
Is it a dim foreboding unborn,
Or a buried memory, wasted and worn
As the fading frost of a wintry sigh?
Anon I shall have it!—anon!—it draws nigh!
A night when—a something it was took place
That drove the blood from that scared moon-face!
Hark! was that the cry of a goat,
Or the gurgle of water in a throat?
Hush! there is nothing to see or hear,
Only a silent something is near;
No knock, no footsteps three or four,
Only a presence outside the door!
See! The moon is remembering—what?
The wail of a mother-left, lie-alone brat?
Or a raven sharpening its beak to peck?
Or a cold blue knife and a warm white neck?
Or only a heart that burst and ceased
For a man that went away released?
I know not—know not, but something is coming
Somehow back with an inward humming!

V  Ha! Look there! Look at that house,
Forsaken of all things, beetle and mouse!
Mark how it looks! It must have a soul!
It looks, it looks, though it cannot stir!
See the ribs of it, how they stare!
Its blind eyes yet have a seeming air!
It knows it has a soul!
Haggard it hangs o’er the slimy pool,
And gapes wide open as corpses gape:
It is the very murderer!
The ghost has modelled himself to the shape
Of this drear house all sodden with woe
Where the deed was done, long, long ago,
And filled with himself his new body full—
To haunt for ever his ghastly crime,
And see it come and go—
Brooding around it like motionless time,
With a mouth that gapes, and eyes that yawn
Blear and Wintering and full of the moon,
Like one aghast at a hellish dawn!—
The deed! The deed! It is coming soon!

VI  For, ever and always, when round the tune
Grinds on the barrel of organ-Time,
The deed is done. And it comes anon:
True to the roll of the clock-faced moon,
True to the ring of the spheric chime,
True to the cosmic rhythm and rime,
Every point, as it first fell out,
Will come and go in the fearsome bout.
See! palsied with horror from garret to core,
The house cannot shut its gaping door;
Its burst eye stares as if trying to see,
And it leans as if settling heavily,
Settling heavy with sickness dull:
It also is hearing the soundless humming
Of the wheel that is turning—the thing that is coming!

On the naked rafters of its brain, [2]
Gaunt and wintered, see the train
Of gossiping, scandal-mongering crows
That watch, all silent, with necks a-strain,
Wickedly knowing, with heads awry
And the sharpened gleam of a cunning eye—
Watch, through the cracks of the ruined skull,
How the evil business goes!—
Beyond the eyes of the cherubim.
Beyond the ears of the seraphim,
Outside, forsaken, in the dim.
Phantom-haunted chaos grim
He stands, with the deed going on in him!

VII  O winds, winds! that lurk and peep
Under the edge of the moony fringe!
O winds, winds, up and sweep,
Up and blow and billow the air.
Billow the air with blow and swinge,
Rend me this ghastly house of groans!
Rend and scatter the skeleton’s bones
Over the deserts and mountains bare!
Blast and hurl and shiver aside
Nailed sticks and mortared stones!
Clear the phantom, with torrent and tide,
Out of the moon and out of my brain,
That the light may fall shadowless in again!

VIII  But, alas! then the ghost
O’er mountain and coast
Would go roaming, roaming! and never was swine
That, Grubbing and talking with snork and whine
On Gadarene mountains, had taken him in,
But would rush to the lake to unhouse the sin!
For any charnel
This ghost is too carnal;
There is no volcano, burnt out and cold,
Whose very ashes are gray and old,
But would cast him forth in reviving flame
To blister the sky with a smudge of shame!

IX  Is there no help? none anywhere,
Under the earth or above the air?—
Come, sad woman, whose tender throat
Has a red-lipped mouth that can sing no note!
Child, whose midwife, the third grim Fate,
Shears in hand, thy coming did wait!
Father, with blood-bedabbled hair!
Mother, all withered with love’s despair!
Come, broken heart, whatever thou be,
Hasten to help this misery!
Thou wast only murdered, or left forlorn:
He is a horror, a hate, a scorn!
Come, if out of the holiest blue
That the sapphire throne shines through;
For pity come, though thy fair feet stand
Next to the elder-band;
Fling thy harp on the hyaline,
Hurry thee down the spheres divine;
Come, and drive these ravens away;
Cover his eyes from the pitiless moon,
Shadow his brain from her stinging spray;
Droop around him, a tent of love,
An odour of grace, a fanning dove;
Walk through the house with the healing tune
Of gentle footsteps; banish the shape
Remorse calls up thyself to ape;
Comfort him, dear, with pardon sweet;
Cool his heart from its burning heat
With the water of life that laves the feet
Of the throne of God and the holy street!

X  O God, he is but a living blot,
Yet he lives by thee—for if thou wast not,
They would vanish together, self-forgot,
He and his crime:—one breathing blown
From thy spirit on his would all atone,
Scatter the horror and bring relief
In an amber dawn of holy grief!
God, give him sorrow, arise from within,
His primal being, deeper man sin!

XI Why do I tremble, a creature at bay?
‘Tis but a dream—I drive it away.
Back comes my breath, and my heart again
Pumps the red blood to my fainting brain
Released from the nightmare’s nine-fold train:
God is in heaven—yes, everywhere,
And Love, the all-shining, will kill Despair!—
To the wall’s blank eyeless space
I turn the picture’s face. [3]

XII  But why is the moon so bare, up there?
And why is she so white?
And why does the moon so stare, up there—
Strangely stare, out of the night?
Why stand up the poplars
That still way?
And why do those two of them
Start astray?
And out of the black why hangs the gray?
Why does it hang down so, I say,
Over that house, like a fringed pall
Where the dead goes by in a funeral?—
Soul of mine,
Thou the reason canst divine:
Into thee the moon doth stare
With pallid, terror-smitten air!
Thou, and the Honor lonely-stark,
Outcast of eternal dark,
Are in nature same and one,
And thy story is not done!
So let the picture face thee from the wall,
And let its white moon stare!

Between the title and the first verse, and divided from the title by a colon,
MacDonald adds a sub-title that half explains or supplements the title:
“Suggested by a drawing of Thomas Moran, the American painter.” Though
not saying much to the understanding, it is most suggestive. He is referring
to the major American landscape painter (1837-1926), who—here MacDonald
apparently blunders—produced an oil painting, The Haunted House (1858).
The use of the word “suggested” is important. MacDonald was inspired for his
poem by Moran’s picture; or the picture gave, or suggested, his poem. Here the
comparison parallels the use of story in programme-music.

Moran portrays a sombre scene, painted in subdued, autumnal colours,
that is nevertheless highly dramatic through its contrasts. Near sunset, a sinister-looking house is mirrored in water that takes up the whole of the foreground. A strong gust of wind moves two poplar trees to the left of the house. The subject is painted in a non-concrete, pre-Impressionistic style, suggesting more than it states and reminiscent of Turner’s paintings. Moran’s picture explicitly points to another no less famous [4] building, the house of Roderick Usher in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). That was the first time the then new, fantastic literature of mystery and imagination had featured a building. Outwardly and inwardly this building reminds us of the ‘Gothic’ novel, mirroring itself narcissistically in the pool before it, into which it finally sinks. Poe’s story influenced landscape portrayal in the second half of the nineteenth century in such a powerful way—especially in fin de siècle literature—that a more exact analysis of his opening passage is worth attempting.

The narrator rides in the evening dusk of a dark autumn day—”a dull, dark, and soundless day [...] when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens” (231)—through a depressing landscape—”a singularly dreary tract of country” (231)—, before finally the “melancholy House of Usher” (231) appears before him. Through the highly symbolic epithet “melancholy,” the anthropomorphic character of the ensouled house is stressed. Then, in a few expressive strokes, Poe’s narrator sketches a fragmentary picture in black-and-white tones. He carries over to his text the principle of a sketch-like indication taken from the pictorial arts. The narrator begins to depict the psychologically-disturbed house surrounded by decaying nature in an unrestful, highly disparate technique of ‘brush-stroke’ and vision: “I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—[...] upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees” (231). A fragment of a house, of a scene, arises in the mind’s eye.

The post-Romantic movement from large panoramic landscapes towards the perceived symbolism of nature—of aspects of the natural world—becomes evident here. Poe depicts nature degraded. His narrator evokes an atmosphere saturated with downfall and decay:—”an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from me decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapour, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued” (233). The thoroughly academic (and exemplarily intended) character of Poe’s text here is emphasised by H.P. Lovecraft. Stressing the idiomatic aspect of Poe’s use of the word “atmosphere” here,² he claims that atmosphere “is the all-important thing, for
the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot, but the creation of a given sensation.” We “must judge a weird tale [...] by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point” (16). Through language, Poe produces a *fluidum* that appears insistent; and only after this does he turn towards the “real aspect of the building” (233). The atmosphere proceeding from the house is evident in the letter from the owner Roderick Usher to the narrator—“The MS. gave evidence of nervous agitation” (232)—, and this has powerfully influenced the narrator. He reflects the highly nervous tension of the letter in the diffused, staccato-like mode of expression in which he relates his impressions. The carefully built up atmosphere produced by the description of the house as an architectonic projection of its owner Roderick Usher is conveyed via the narrator to the reader. [5]

This ‘atmospheric’ part is followed by theoretical considerations on art. The narrator asks himself whence comes this depressing atmosphere—”an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart” (231)—, concluding: “I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies in considerations beyond our depth” (231). He goes on to assume that the self-consistent concept of the whole—the mutual activity of the separate elements—plays a central role. The reasons for the impressive overall effect evade analysis, and this too is intentional. Indeed, as Poe of course intends, the beginning of “The Fall of the House of Usher” is fashioned with the highest storytelling skill, closely approaching a prose-poem. Poe suggests secret mutual influences between non-living and living matter—between house and inhabitant. Yet behind these occult ideas there lies a hidden understanding of poetry, here seemingly understood as an arcane discipline and thereby dedicated to the primacy of technical virtuosity.

The four mutually interwoven principles used in depicting the house produce the oppressive effect that has decisively influenced subsequent presentations of ‘The House’ in fantastic literature or in mystery and imagination. They have given the House of Usher the character of a prototype. In the first place, Poe takes the house as a living and ensouled being. According to a comparison reaching right back to ancient times, he describes the facade of the house as a face. He ascribes to the house, moreover, a soul that does not merely seem, but is melancholic. There is the additional effect of the description being consciously fragmented. The reader receives an incomplete picture of the house limited to a few indicative details, which are to be
completed through his or her imagination. The third principle is the analogy between building and inhabitant, pursued throughout. Here the other meaning of “house,” that is, “family and forebears,” comes to the fore. Roderick Usher is, so to speak, connected with his family symbiotically through destiny. He and his house constantly mirror each other, presenting the motif of decadence in a dual fashion. The fourth principle, which, like the previous one, is also clearly taken from the ‘Gothic’ novel tradition, is the presentation of psychic events and conditions through an architectonic set. Consequently, the empty window-cavities, the blind eyes of the house, point towards Roderick Usher’s psychological condition. Understood metafictionally, these are “the particulars of the scene, [...] the details of the picture” (231). If one now considers that “seen” is a homophone of “scene” (“landscape picture”), men this clearly shows what Poe, faithful to the Romantic ideal conception of a synthesis of the arts, is striving for: a picture of the house of Usher created by means of language.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” contains further relationships to the pictorial arts. Even in the description of the picture painted by Usher, the dilettante artist, as “phantasmagoric conceptions” (237), Poe restrains himself, speaking only of “vagueness” (236) and of “utter simplicity, [...] nakedness” (237). Stressing the pathological character of the artistic process, he writes of the “pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas” (237). Usher’s art, illustrated through a very eloquent example, is an art of thought: “if ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher” (237):

A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor. (237)

This symbolic tunnel leading downwards, a mise en abime, reveals Usher’s existence and future, and can be read as the ecphrasis ['an explaining, recounting’ Tr.] of a symbolic painting. In his story, Poe twice recreates a nocturne through language. First, when preparing the climax of the dramatic entrance of Usher’s sister, he depicts the house, in the midst of a raging storm, with extraordinary light effects that appear to be supernatural.
Although he begins with a Romantic antagonism between terror and beauty, in describing these light-effects his writing additionally anticipates Symbolist art.

It was, indeed, a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty. A whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity; for there were frequent and violent alterations in the direction of the wind; and the exceeding density of the clouds (which hung so low as to press upon the turrets of the house) did not prevent our perceiving the life-like velocity with which they flew careering from all points against each other, without passing away into the distance. I say that even their exceeding density did not prevent our perceiving this—yet we had no glimpse of the moon or stars, nor was there any flashing forth of the lightning. But the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion. (242)

The second picture expresses more strongly the house of Usher just before it sinks into the water of the pool:

The storm was still abroad in all its wrath [...]. Suddenly mere shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued; for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely discernible fissure, of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base. (245)

Finally, house and text fall into those fragments out of which Poe had constructed them:

While I gazed this fissure rapidly widened—mere came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled [7] as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder —there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the “House of Usher.” (245)
One point needs to be made clearer in this connection. A “haunted house” in the broadest sense is one in which some supernatural events occur. But this does not occur in Poe’s story. Because the supernatural is completely missing, Poe’s short story is not fantastic nor is the house of Usher haunted. It is a sinister house—more exactly a domicile—in a state of collapse, which visually presents Usher’s psyche. The ballad Roderick Usher recites, with guitar accompaniment, called “The Haunted Palace” (238f.), describes, with strong allegorical undertones, the change of a radiant, living palace into a sinister habitation. With it, as *mise en abyme*, the decay of Usher’s psyche / Usher’s house is paraphrased. Poe uses the concept of “haunted” to convey the idea of a torment ed psyche, invaded by demons: “But evil things, in robes of sorrow / assailed the monarch’s high estate” (238).

The autumnal mood of doom, the anthropomorphic-body of the house, the window-panes mirrored in the water—all these are to be found again in Moran’s picture, which essentially depicts the house of Usher as it appears to the narrator at the beginning of the story. The picture can be seen as a transformation of a passage of text into pictorial art. The only noteworthy change that Moran makes from Poe’s very compressed text is to introduce, through the picture-title, the image of a *haunted* house. He thereby indicates that in his painting it certainly appears that supernatural things do occur in and around the house. MacDonald confesses right at the beginning, that he is stimulated in his poem by Moran’s picture, which he knows is based on Poe’s “House of Usher.” Consequently, the “House of Usher” lives on in MacDonald’s poem. We can say that MacDonald’s “Haunted House” is twice haunted, by Moran’s picture and by Poe’s text.

Both the formal structure of MacDonald’s poem and the complicated content could be called labyrinthine. Here the difficulties in understanding the text are already in evidence. We are dealing with a comparatively long poem of 210 lines, divided into 12 sections of varying length. If the correspondence of house and poem is continued, these can be imagined as twelve rooms of varying size. Typographically, the separate parts are not divided by partitions (and thereby not made recognisable as strophes, i.e. recognised according to their content),³ so that the primary impression is of a undivided, quickly-moving lyrical text. Through the complicated rhyme-scheme within the variable metre of the verses—the rhyme partly returning only after seven lines—the impression is given of an approach to free verse or non-metrical speech.

Despite its length, “The Haunted House” is a lyrical poem, not a ballad. It lacks a plot in the conventional sense; though MacDonald certainly indicates
something like a fragmentary story in his poem—a story the reader is expected to supplement and complete. The tension between these three elements—lyrical passages, hidden plot and information drawn out by the reader—structures the poem. Any account of the [8] house/poem needs to consider, above all, the following questions: What is narrated? Given the foregrounding of the haunting in the title, how is the haunted house presented? How and in what form are Moran’s picture and Poe’s short story present?

Part 1 of MacDonald’s poem, like the beginning of “The Fall of the House of Usher,” functions as a mood-creating, almost musical exposition. It creates a mysterious, expressive atmosphere of nature-magic which is maintained throughout the poem, and which serves as the essential characteristic of fantastic lyricism. Composed out of a few elements that later re-occur like leitmotifs—moon, trees, wind, pool—there emerges a latent, threatening nocturne. Additionally an anthropomorphic aspect is present. The pool appears in a sinister, threatening metaphor as “with dead gray eye” (1.7). This “eye” in a mysterious way, suddenly begins to freeze over (1.7ff), while the trees suggest sentries: “each a sentinel drawn up” (1.4). Tension, almost palpable, lies over everything: “This must be the very night!” (1.1). The night contains concealed the ominous secret: “the dark night/ With its fringe of light, / Holds the secret in its cup!” (1.10ff.), and possibly will reveal it. The secret is terrible because this sinister nature, filled with its own life, causes, supports, comments upon and mirrors both physical and—more importantly—psychological events, as in Romantic and Symbolist poetry. MacDonald diverges from Poe’s poem and Moran’s picture in two ways. Instead of dusk, “the dark night” reigns, with a full moon high in the sky. Initially the house is not mentioned. Poe, at the beginning of his story, draws a picture of a morbid, decadent landscape that was to remain influential right into the twentieth century. MacDonald’s opening, set in dismal motion with great rhetorical gesture, is indebted to Romantic nature-poetry. It primarily orientates to the ciphers of moon and wind taken over from the very end of Poe’s story.

In Part 2 a further ‘picture-frame’ continues the atmospheric introduction, intensifying it towards an announced discord. A stronger tension is observed in nature. The wind has calmed down; but two poplars—those which stand beside the house in Moran’s picture—move, not because of the wind but because filled with “a frenzy of speechless pain” (1.19). The “full-grown moon” is shocked into the brutal aspect of “a blasted eye in the midnight air” (1.24). “Something has gone wrong; / A scream will come tearing out ere long!” (11.25-26).
In Part 3 the speaker moves into the picture. Apparently he stands in or in front of the landscape just described (or in / before Moran’s picture), and now perceives that a “thing” (1.38) approaches: “something is coming, I know—is coming!” (1.29). Then, again, “Something is coming—coming— / Growing and coming!” (1.34f.). Acoustically supported by a paradoxical “unheard drumming” (1.33), later “unheard spectral drumming” (1.40), this thing appears as something extraordinarily threatening. The reaction of the moon reveals this: “And the moon is aware, / Aghast in the air / At the thing that is only coming” (1.36ff.) Whether the thing has to do with an inner psychological phenomenon or whether a physical being is approaching [9] remains undecided: “Somewhere in me, or if in the air / I cannot tell, but it is there!” (1.3If.). Such uncertainty, according to Tzvetan Todorov’s definition (29), is decisive evidence for the fantastic. How far, the reader wonders, is the speaker involved in these events. What does he expect, what does he fear and suspect, listening anxiously with “bated breath”? (1.28).

Part 4 breaks the climax of tension that has grown to a crescendo and annuls the expectation that has just been awakened, the fearful curiosity about the nameless “thing”: “Nothing to see and nothing to hear!” (1.41). This section—which only seemingly slows down and for the sake of intensity—has been almost completely kept in rhyming couplets, and it confronts the reader with a sequence of suggestive pictures. Through the “inner sky” (1.42)—the psyche of the speaker is meant here—there flashes an intimation: “the wing of a shadowy thought” (1.43). Emotionally in turmoil, he seems to remember another night when something terrible (and unutterable) happened, which even made the moon pale: “A night when—a something it was took place / That drove the blood from that scared moon-face!” (1.51f.). Yet what happened then remains unclear. The silence is now disturbing; the acoustic hallucination, an “unheard” noise reminds the narrator of “the cry of a goat” (1.52) or “the gurgle of water in a throat” (1.53). Meanwhile, the “silent something” (1.55) approaches and stands before the door: “No knock, no footsteps three or four / Only a presence outside the door!” (1.57f.). The expression “presence,” no doubt intentionally chosen, means both “to be present in time and place”, and can also mean “a ghostly being.” Either way, outside—in the unconscious of the speaker or in reality before the picture / house / poem—something is there demanding entrance, wanting to enter, to be perceived. Perhaps the speaker possesses a divided personality and now the other half, so far kept under, pushes through.

Via the door-metaphor, MacDonald for the first time entwines the
house with the psyche of the narrator, or with the human psyche as such. Further suggestions regarding what kind the past events could be are then presented, in additive sequence, as fragmented pictures of an occurrence. Their whole purpose is to serve as an introduction to free association: “The wail of a mother-left, lie-alone brat? / Or a raven sharpening its beak to peck? / Or a cold blue knife and a warm white neck? / Or only a heart that burst and ceased / For a man that went away released?” (11.59-63).

Part 5 serves to evoke both the location of the events and the psyche of the house / protagonist, spurned by all living beings. Like Poe and Moran, MacDonald hardly describes, but only mentions some details which underline the anthropomorphic, basic tendencies. “Blind eyes” (1.71), “a mourn that gapes, and eyes that yawn / Blear and Wintering and full of the moon” (1.83f.) are mentioned. The house consequently receives a face of horror, distorted and mad. It is bent over the pool of water: “Haggard it hangs o’er the slimy pool / And gapes wide open as corpses gape” (1.73f). The initial given situation of Poe and Moran is reached, or rather conjured up, even though the dull watery mirror, symbol of the unconscious, allows no reflection; The speaker goes so far as to ascribe to the house a soul: First, presuming, he says: “It must have a soul!” (1.68). Then, four lines later: “It knows it has a soul!” (1.72). The house, the speaker is sure, must be the murderer: “It is the very murderer!” (1.75). The “ghosts” (1.76)—apparently the spirit of the perpetrator—entered the house where long ago the “deed” (1.78) was committed, in order again and again to experience or celebrate this deed: “To haunt for ever his ghastly crime / And see it come and go—” (1.80f.).

The house, the place of events, gifted in such a way with a soul, now anticipates its enlivening through the subsequent deed, which apparently is repeatable from time to time, “Deed” here functions as a palindrome: “The deed! The deed! It is coming soon!” (1.86). The role of the speaker is certainly unclear. Does he recall the event, or are the connections regarding the house / picture communicated to him in another way? MacDonald mysteriously extends the popular nineteenth century motif of the haunted house. No longer a place of happenings connected loosely or more closely to a crucial event, this haunted house changes in that the perpetrator chooses its form, making it into a quasi-active person—a monstrous thing. Yet from another aspect the house expresses the psyche of the perpetrator. Like Poe at the beginning of his story, MacDonald assigns attributes and qualities to the house, meaningfully calling it “haggard” (1.73) and “drear” (1.77).

Part 6 initially fulfils a similar retarding function. MacDonald here
alludes to certain cosmic laws, but purposely remains mysterious. “True to the roll of the clock-faced moon, / True to the ring of the spheric chime, / True to the cosmic rhythm and rime” (1.90ff.), the now completely anthropomorphised house / perpetrator, as an impersonal “It” (1.100), expects the recurrence of the once-accomplished deed: “See! palsied with horror from garret to core; / The house cannot shut its gaping door; / Its burst eye stares as if trying to see, / And it leans as if settling heavily, / Settling heavy with sickness dull” (11.94-99). A flock of crows, “the train / Of gossiping, scandal-mongering crows” (1.103f.), are sitting in the empty garret, the head of the house, “the ruined skull”(l. 107), observing “How the evil business goes!” (1.108).

Then the perspective abruptly changes. Beside the house now stands a man, spatially and temporarily on an abstract metaphysical level. “Outside, forsaken, in the dim / Phantom-haunted chaos grim” (1.112f), there stands a man who re-experiences “the deed going on in him” (1.114). MacDonald speaks of “He” (1.114). Is this the perpetrator, i.e. the murderer? Has he released himself from the house and again become a human figure? It remains open, moreover, whether he and the speaker of the poem are identical, or whether he projected himself into both the poem and the picture through the magically suggestive power of the word. With the abrupt appearance of the perpetrator—a superhuman figure cloaked in darkness—the poem reaches its climax.

In Part 7 MacDonald immediately interrupts what seemed about to start with the above-mentioned “He”—the deed. The house, with the deed which took place in [11] it, now appears increasingly oppressive, and the speaker—desperate and out of himself—calls to the winds that they may destroy the building—”the skeleton’s bones” (1.121)—and strewn far and wide (c.f. 11.115-124). The “phantom” (ghost or nightmare) must be driven out from the ghastly moonlight and out of the brain of the speaker, in order that the light can again shine in unhindered (c.f. 1.125ff).

Part 8 retracts, as it were, the wish expressed in Part 7, because the spirit / “ghost” (1.128), i.e. the spirit of the house or the mysterious “He,” would then be set free and would haunt the whole world (c.f. 11.128-130). The two paradoxical lines: “For any charnel / This ghost is too carnal” (1.134f.) are like a riddle. Does this “ghost” coincide with the speaker? How is it possible to induce or bind this figure, this spirit? The picture of the impure swine that would not take up the impure spirit, or “sin” (1.133; c.f. 11.130-133), relates to two passages in the Bible (Matt 8.28-34 and Mk 5.1-20). In Gadara, “on Gadarene mountains” (1.132), Jesus healed the man possessed and drove
the evil demons into the swine.  

With this MacDonald leads over into Part 9. The speaker considers how the sinner could be helped. Wife and child, father and mother, indeed all broken hearts, are called upon (1.142-149) in order to soothe the “misery” (1.149) of the sinner. Again, it remains unclear whether these persons are connected with the perpetrator in any way, or whether the text is dealing with archetypal figures who should comfort or save the outsider. Unobtrusively, the evaluation of the mysterious man who has become guilty is changing. Previously he has been spurned: “He is a horror, a hate, a scorn!” (1.151); now heavenly help is requested. This help is asked to walk through the house in order to stimulate a cleansing and healing process: “Comfort him, dear, with pardon sweet; / cool his heart from its burning heat / With the water of life” (1.166ff.). MacDonald pictures this quasi-exorcism in common animal allegory: “Come, and drive those ravens away” (1-158) and then asks that the healer “Droop around him, a tent of love, / An odour of grace, a fanning dove” (1.161f.).

Part 10 leads this thought of forgiveness further and clearly establishes that if God did not exist, then the perpetrator and his deed would also not exist: “O God [...] / Yet he lives by thee—for if you wast not, / They would vanish together, self forgot, / He and his crime” (1.171ff). It is clearly expressed that MacDonald’s speaker here adopts a world-picture wherein the good and the bad belong inseparably together, in no way is all hope lost; for God is able to allow the “primal being, deeper than sin” (1.178) of the perpetrator to “arise from within.”

Part 11 turns from the perpetrator towards the obviously concerned speaker, “a creature at bay” (1.179). What he has so intensively experienced, is, he thinks, a nightmare which he decisively shakes off as life slowly returns to him (c.f. 1.180E). Now he explicitly formulates (already since 1.161 in couplets) the Christian moral of the poem, the didactic character of which here finally breaks through: “God is in heaven—yes, everywhere, / And love, the all-shining, will kill Despair!” (1.184f). But can this general love kill the despair, can it heal the miscreant? And does the [12] reader follow this idealistic conviction? When the speaker now turns to the wall the picture which he had been looking at the whole time—and which according to the paratextual subtitle merely stimulated the nightmare and the poem—MacDonald is returning to Moran’s picture, his starting point: “To the waits blank eyeless space / I turn the picture’s face” (1.187f.). The crucial face of the picture, the house, is to be robbed of its great hypnotic power.
That this thoroughly fails is shown in the final Part 12. A moment of tremendous unquiet exists just prior to this turning. The white moon continues its ominous staring at the speaker, the poplars strain motionless in the air, and an oppressive gray hangs over the house (c.f. 11.189-196). The speaker finds himself in the same sombre state as is symbolised by the turned-away picture. Reality and art, so it seems, have coalesced. With this, the confusion is complete. Where does the speaker stand? In the picture or in surroundings which equal Moran’s haunted house? Is the speaker fictional or real? Moreover, the ghost of the haunted house is by no means conquered. At the end, the speaker establishes that he and the dark outsider, the “Horror lonely-stark / Outcast of eternal dark” (1.205ff.), are, from the aspect of their (human) nature, one and the same (c.f. 1.207). Furthermore, his story is not finished: “thy story is not done!” (1.207). What does MacDonald mean? Does the poem, then, discuss the case of the man who has become guilty as such, or does it refer to the speaker striving in imagination to be identical with the perpetrator? Inevitably, the poem ends with the demand to turn the picture front-wards again, so that the white moon, a disquieting cipher, can continue to stare at the speaker.

“The Haunted House” is a rich, heterogeneous structure, almost like a Chinese puzzle. Initially MacDonald writes a picture-poem—a debate with Moran’s picture. In this connection it is worth noting again that he expressly speaks of “a drawing” which stimulated him. Indeed, MacDonald takes Moran’s coloured picture as a drawing—if one understands “drawing” as “sketch, or design”—for his raw material. By the means of language, he, as it were, paints it into a poem. Because of this, the poem is very different from conventional picture-poems (Kranz 1983-1987.155f; Pestalozzi, passim). MacDonald, so to speak, overcomes Moran’s poem. Furthermore, “The Haunted House” in its lyrical form is an unusual debate with the haunted-house motif. MacDonald creates a murderer who becomes a house in order to experience his deed over and over again, with the anthropomorphic basic character latently present in every haunted house taken to the extreme. However, because the deed—a murder—is not clearly described, the poem distances itself from the fantastic and approaches an allegorical-didactic poem with a clearly formulated Christian moral. The change from the ravens to the dove (c.f. 1.158 and 1.162) seems to indicate this.

Thirdly—and this seems to be the most interesting thing—”The Haunted House” is self-referent, wavering indecisively between tradition and innovation, between late Romanticism and Symbolism. It presents both these
directions of art. Poe’s story “The Fall of the House of Usher” appears as a
connecting link. [13] MacDonald is, in part, explicitly against contemporary
tendencies in poetry when he chooses the long and overlong form at a time
when the gradually dawning European Symbolism expressly demanded short
poems. Furthermore, he describes a wild, threatening, late-Romantic and
black-romantic landscape with partly Expressionist elements; yet by around
1870 park-views or modernist townscapes were the mode. These anachronistic
elements of the poem contrast with the primacy of the virtuoso suggestion of
Symbolism that shows and describes nothing, instead employing just a few—
but therefore all the more suggestive—images. Here MacDonald openly uses
Symbolism. One example is the so-strange and estranging moon, which shines
throughout the poem and develops into a riddling cipher. 8 MacDonald, with
regard to his own lyrical language, is unsure, pulled hither and thither between
innovation and imitation. The deep insecurity of language and poetic doubt
suffered by the best authors at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century here
comes to expression. “The Haunted House” is only superficially concerned
with a haunted house—we actually find ourselves in the haunted house of
poetry.

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Notes
1. “The Haunted House,” written during MacDonald’s tour of America 1872/73, appeared in January 1874 in the New York journal Scribener’s Monthly, in which he had already published Wilfried Cumbermede (1870/71), the poem “A Vision of St Eligius” and the “Spiritual Songs from Novalis” (1873). In 1883 “The Haunted House” appeared in the privately printed collection of poems A Threefold Cord, also containing poems by his brother John Hill MacDonald and his friend Greville Matheson. The definitive version printed here appears in The Poetical Works, Vol. 2,203-208. Raeper (106-125) arrives at the following valuation on MacDonald’s lyrics: “Much of MacDonald’s verse is unmemorable, but the themes which throbbed through its lines were to take other forms, notably in fairy tales and romances, and these were fated to remain compelling and enduring” (125).
2. Lovecraft calls Poe “in a sense the father of the Decadents and the Symbolists” (54) and “lord of the frightful mysteries of time and space” (57); on Usher see 57f.
4. Is the raven which sharpens his beak a reference to Poe’s poem “The Raven” (1845)? There, along with the raven, a foreign being does enter the room.
5. The adjective “slimy” seems to pre-empt Lovecraft’s terminology of the amorphous. In Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” such an idea of the water or the sea can also be found: “Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs / Upon the slimy sea!” (Coleridge 176).
6. For a modern version of the fantastic house see Amos, Architectura (passim). This comprises in Amos “This home” and—intermediately discussed—”Das Spukhaus...”. 7. See Longfellow’s “The Demoniac of Gadara” Christus: A Mystery, I, VII; 1872).
8. Compare the moon in Wilde’s Salome (1893). “Look at the moon! How strange the moon seems” appears already at the beginning of the drama (552).