

SECRET PASSAGE THROUGH POE: THE TRANSATLANTIC  
AFFINITIES OF H. P. LOVECRAFT AND STEFAN GRABIŃSKI

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*To the memory of Professor Andrzej Kopcewicz, a master reader from whom I  
have learnt more of life and letters than any apprentice may expect.*

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on intertextual relations between selected horror stories by H. P. Lovecraft and Polish writer Stefan Grabiński. Using a triadic concept of intertextuality derived by Michael Riffaterre from Peircean semiotics, this is to demonstrate that the interpretant connecting Lovecraft and Grabiński is "The tell-tale heart" by Edgar Allan Poe.

In "Botany Bay", a bizarre short story by Annie Trumbull Slosson, included in her 1891 collection *Seven dreamers*, the protagonist, named Baalam Montmorcency, develops an obsession that somewhere overseas lives "a weird, mysterious duplicate of himself" (Slosson [1890] 1969: 62), whose uncorroborated distant presence eventually brings him to suicide. Baalam, a Connecticut countryside herbalist and self-sentenced outcast of society, cannot live with the excruciating knowledge that the principle of individual uniqueness, rooted in the individuality of souls, has been inexplicably violated. Accusing God of an error of creating the same soul "twice", he explains in this genuine Southern New England dialect, "we aint't twins, *we're each other*, don't you see?" (Slosson 1969: 65). The only solution to this unbearable equation is elimination of one element to make room in the world for the other him by disappearing into nothingness.

Surely analogies are often misleading, but under the circumstances this Gothic preamble may not be amiss as an introduction to another pair of eccentric misfits who lived at the turn of the twentieth century as well, separated by the Atlantic ocean and most likely quite unaware of each other. One, Howard Philips Lovecraft, born August 20, 1890 in Providence, RI, where he also died

March 15, 1937, is now considered one of the most outstanding weird fiction writers of the English language. The other, Stefan Grabiński, was born February 26, 1887 in a small town on the river Bug in the east of Poland and died November 12, 1936 not far away, in the city of Lvov, then Polish as well, where he worked as high school teacher and contributed to local literary magazines. Today his work remains virtually unknown outside the audience reading in his native tongue (a selection of his tales has been also published in the German Gothic series, *Bibliothek des Hauses Usher* [Hutnikiewicz 1980: 22]) – had he been translated into English, however, he might find his legitimate place among the modern masters of the horror genre. In his lifetime, Grabiński published eight collections of stories and four novels, as well as a number of uncollected tales and essays on various literary matters. His three plays and another, unfinished, novel still remain unpublished in manuscript.

Characteristically, regardless of all the differences of background – in origin, culture, and language – both Lovecraft and Grabiński were not only practitioners of weird fiction, but also its theorists. The former wrote in 1925-27 an extended historical study on “Supernatural horror in literature”, focusing on the genealogy of the Gothic and its development in Britain and the United States, the latter published in 1928 in a Lvov literary magazine an introduction to a never completed longer essay, “O twórczości fantastycznej” [“On fantastic literature”], and, what is perhaps more significant in the present context, in 1931 an essay on Poe, called “Książę fantastów” [“The prince of fantasists”]. In his account of the supernatural in fiction, the American writer singled out one specific figure – not surprisingly, Poe as well – to whose work he devoted a separate chapter. The Pole, too, had no doubt that in the history of the Gothic horror the author of “Ligeia” deserved the highest rank and appreciation. In the twentieth century, both of them considered themselves, independently though identically, followers of the “strong” master; his indirect disciples trying to use the trail blazed by the *Tales of the grotesque and arabesque*.

To be precise, both Lovecraft and Grabiński had their own, particular thematic agendas reaching far beyond Poe’s historically and culturally determined scope. Most Lovecraft scholars, argues Stefan Dziemianowicz, tend to believe that his properly “Poesque” stage ended in 1926 (Shultz – Joshi 1991: 174) with the story, “Cool air”, written in March that year, before many of his best known pieces, such as “The case of Charles Dexter Ward” (1927), “The Dunwich horror” (1928), “At the mountains of madness” (1931) or “The haunter in the dark” (1935). It is a critical commonplace that the list of formative influences on the Providence recluse includes also Lord Dunsany, Arthur Machen, and Algernon Blackwood. Grabiński owed almost all his limited literary fame to two books of horror tales, each with a distinct thematic dominant: one titled *Demon ruchu* [The demon of motion] (1918), gothicizing whatever happens to be related to the

railroad system, the other called *Księga ognia* [*The book of fire*] (1922), revealing deep fascination with the element that burns things to ashes. Unlike Grabiński – and, for that matter, Hawthorne – Poe did not pay much attention to railroads, while fire plays a major role in his fiction only occasionally, in “Metzengerstein” or “The conversation of Eiros and Charmion”.

Lovecraft also had his well-known favorite motifs and phantasms: the survival of the “Old Ones” who (which?) had lived on Earth long before *homo sapiens* appeared, degeneration of ancient families through cross-breeding with various outlandish creatures, the interference of “eldritch” gods from the outer space with human affairs (the superior, most sinister Divinity bears the name of chaos incarnate), and the pernicious influence of non-Caucasian, immigrant ethnic groups on modern America. Some of those motifs evidently make another episode in the history of American obscurantism, to use a once catchy phrase (courtesy of Ivor Winters), while most are separated by a world of difference from the technological and elemental paraphernalia of Grabiński’s fiction. Yet, in several cases, in spite of the long distance between Lvov and Providence in many respects, the weird realities “spawned” (a frequent verb in Lovecraft’s highly idiosyncratic vocabulary) by the two writers seem to overlap and their narrative technique shows considerable, if not elective, affinities.

It is rather surprising that Grabiński, heir to the tradition of Polish Gothic dating back to the turn of the eighteenth century when it was originated (in French) by Jan Potocki, author of *The tales of the Saragossa manuscript*, and Józef Maksymilian Ossoliński, did not rely either on the local Polish past, or on exotic stylization. (Indeed, the American Lovecraft seems to be much more historically oriented. His New England had no Middle Ages, but under the circumstances the Puritan times would do.) The usual setting of Grabiński’s horror stories is the generally familiar milieu of his contemporary Poland, with one characteristic but in fact hardly noticeable feature: none of his fictional place names can be found on the map of the country and no actual Polish town or city is ever mentioned, either. One might say that his imaginary spacetime, vaguely Polish as it is, is in fact nowhere in particular and now, in sharp contrast with the conventional regionalism and antiquarian “olden days” of the classic Gothic. “Szary pokój” [“The gray room”], saturated with the ominous presence of its former occupant who hanged himself and keeps haunting the nightmares of the next boarder, seems to be suspended in the air – a part of no apartment, no house, no block, no street, no district, and no town. “Szalona zagroda” [“A crazy farm”], with a self-perpetuating scenario of recurrent family murder, is located in the outskirts of the “town of N.” carefully stripped of any recognizable points of interest or details. The demoniac Józef Brzechwa, who persecutes the narrator in “Zez” [“Squint”], jumps out of the blue and in the end suddenly enters his victim’s body, with no other whereabouts ever revealed. In the nega-

tive context of abstractness, the positive common denominator of all these tales is the intensity of the protagonist's traumatic experience – his state of mind, the unspecified frenzy of mounting fear.

On the contrary, Lovecraft has been typically classified as a Gothic regionalist, the “true epicure in the terrible ... [who] esteems most of all the ancient, lonely farmhouses of backwoods New England” (Lovecraft 1963: 116), but even though his native Providence at times serves as a sufficiently picturesque setting (e.g. in “The case of Charles Dexter Ward”), in most cases the reader visits the nonexistent town of Arkham with its Miskatonic University, perhaps instead of Brown. Hence, Southern New England of Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Connecticut remain, somewhat like Grabiński's sketchy Poland, the background matrix generating plots rooted in the past of the region, but at a closer look the fictional topography turns out quite arbitrary. Many of Lovecraft's tales written in the 1910s and early 1920s, such as “The tomb”, “Dagon”, and “The outsider”, are set in some basic domestic scenery or the realm of nightmare, stripped of any coordinates attaching them to the documented real. “The tomb” highlights the predicament of a Jervas Dudley, living near the family sepulcher of the Hydes, who imagines himself as Jervas Hyde, to be encrypted after death in a still empty coffin that waits ready to welcome his corpse among the alleged ancestors. It is difficult to decide whether the action takes place in Britain or America: the name “Jervas” sounds vaguely feudal, a reference to the “rich and celebrated Squire Brewster, a maker of local history who was interred in 1711” (Lovecraft 1965: 7) is culturally ambiguous, and the denouement brings no helpful clues at all. “Dagon”, the earliest manifestation of a monstrous underwater menace originating from the times immemorial, so characteristic of Lovecraft's later fantasies, is almost totally decontextualized, except for one brief reference to a hospital in San Francisco. The place where the narrator faces his destiny does not have a specific address – a room and a window are enough to make a rough-hewn stage for the title ghoul and its victim. In “The outsider” the lonely protagonist dwells in what appears to be a castle situated in a dreamlike space under the ground. As it turns out, the castle's highest pinnacle ends with a grating that bars a passage to the upper world consisting of a graveyard, an ancient church, and yet another castle; the last stop on the outsider's road to self-recognition. Like in Grabiński's stories, emphasis falls here on the state of progressing mental derangement. In all the three cases, Lovecraft's characters primarily demonstrate their hopeless plight, no matter where they actually belong in terms of geography.

This is how Jervas Dudley of “The tomb” begins his testimony of madness that brought him to solitary confinement in a locked room with barred windows:

In relating the circumstances which have led to my confinement within this refuge for the demented, I am aware that my present position will create a natural doubt for the authenticity of my narrative. It is an unfortunate fact that the bulk of humanity is too limited in its mental vision to weigh with patience and intelligence those isolated phenomena, seen and felt only by the psychologically sensitive few, which lie outside its common experience. Men of broader intellect know that there is no sharp distinction betwixt the real and the unreal; that all things appear as they do only by virtue of the delicate individual physical and mental media through which we are made conscious of them; but the prosaic materialism of the majority condemns as madness the flashes of super-sight which penetrate the common veil of obvious empiricism

(Lovecraft 1965: 3).

Grabiński's "Grey room", published in 1920 in the collection *Szalony pątnik* [*The mad pilgrim*], opens with the following confession of the narrator:

My last apartment has not satisfied me, either. At first it seemed that the reason why I escaped from the previous one could not repeat here; that at last I would be safe from something unknown that forced me to leave my former abode. But a few days which I have spent in this newly rented room convinced me that my new shelter is even worse than the former one, as some disquieting features which made me dislike it here took an even more acute and oppressive form. After two weeks spent at my new place I reached a sad conclusion that I fell into a trap much more intricate than before; that the unpleasant atmosphere which scared me out of my previous apartment repeats itself in a considerably augmented measure. Having realized this inauspicious state of affairs, first I started searching for its causes within my own self

(Grabiński 1980: 223; translation mine).

In both stories, the perplexed protagonists occupy single rooms and complain of their mental problems. For Jervas Dudley the room is his final destination due to a series of events that began elsewhere (otherwise one might say that his ultimate retreat would be the tomb), while the nameless narrator of Grabiński eventually breaks free from the spell, but the focus and the ambiance of the two tales is essentially the same. Identical is also their narrative setup: a soliloquy of the painfully self-conscious mind approaching the brink of destruction, overpowered by some force of an inscrutable origin. Since the Gothic has traditionally been a highly formulaic code, dependent on a repertoire of more or less conventional devices, the affinities of the American and the Pole may yield to an explanation in terms of literary history. In other words, the chain that seems to connect Lovecraft and Grabiński against all odds may be anchorable to some third term, a necessary *interpretant*, to use one of the key concepts of the Peircean semiotics recycled by Riffaterre (1984: 81-114) in his model of intertextuality.

What sets apart the authors of “The tomb” and “The gray room” is geography and history: the Atlantic and the treatment of the past, paradoxically repressed in the case of the Polish writer who had it at his disposal, and often compulsively foregrounded by the New Englander who would complain on its scarcity. Thus, read separately, their texts point to disparate realities that can only confirm the double gap. If, however, they are read in reference to the “concept of interpretant, that is, a sign that translates the text’s surface signs and explains what else the text suggests” (Riffaterre 1984: 81), the conditions of literary response are likely to change. Arguably, an interpretant which modifies them radically is the work of Edgar Allan Poe, particularly such tales of horror as “The tell-tale heart”, “The black cat”, William Wilson”, “Ligeia” or “Berenice”, where the object of the reader’s interest is not so much the course of events, but the workings of the obsessed and isolated mind forced to act by the factors apparently beyond its control:

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it hunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was his eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees – very gradually – I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever

(Poe [1843] 1984: 555).

Consequently, approached as the founder of the psycho-Gothic, Poe becomes a “missing link” between Lovecraft and Grabiński. This, as Riffaterre (1983: 118) has put it, “move from mimesis to semiosis”, from the attention paid to the “object of sign” and its “meaning” (according to the Peircean usage) to that focused on the “idea to which is gives rise” (i.e. the mind unwillingly denouncing its own clear and distinct perception), brings into play the third term taken from literary history. The equilateral triangle Lovecraft – Poe – Grabiński provides an explanation of the transatlantic affinities and leaves little room for any alternative. The intertextual relationship is a fact, but as a fact it perhaps needs corroboration reaching beyond rhetoric and the mere anxiety of influence.

To be sure, in “Supernatural horror in literature” Lovecraft stressed the psychological bias of Poe’s horror tales, crediting his predecessor with a truly innovative approach to the Gothic convention: “Before Poe the bulk of weird writers had worked largely in the dark; without an understanding of the psychological basis of the horror appeal... [He] studied the human mind rather than the usages of the Gothic fiction, and worked with an analytical knowledge of terror’s true sources which doubled the force of his narratives and emancipated him from all the absurdities inherent in merely conventional shudder-coining”

(Lovecraft 1965: 395-396). Grabiński, distinguishing in his theoretical speculations between “the fantastic which is direct, external, and conventional” and that which is “internal, psychological, scientific, psychological, and metaphysical”, called also “psychofantastic or metafantastic” (Grabiński [1928], quoted in Hutnikiewicz [1959: 123]; translation mine) deemed the latter to be far superior to the former and assigned it proper origin to “The tell-tale heart” and other tales of Poe. In the metafantastic

psychology reigns supreme. The fantastic does not come into being from the outside, but appears and develops in ourselves under the influence of events which we believe to be normal. The artist starts with common, “innocent” occurrences arousing no suspicion, which at a certain point, imperceptibly, due to a masterful arrangement of apparently minor details, cease to be normal, all of a sudden cross the safe boundary of the everyday, and then somehow we realize that we are on the other side

(Grabiński [1928], quoted in Hutnikiewicz [1959: 123-124]; translation mine).

Almost needless to say, the expert at applying this particular strategy, favorably contrasted with E. T. A. Hoffmann who every now and then could not help summoning specters and demons, was Poe. In Poe’s tales, writes Grabiński, “the only cause of the events and visions is the human soul; the mysterious and still unexplored self and its marvelous, sometimes dangerous and uncanny abilities and powers” (Grabiński [1928], quoted in Hutnikiewicz [1959: 124; translation mine). Evidently, though perhaps also oddly enough, knowing nothing of each other (Grabiński could not even read English), the two gothicists happened to belong to the same sect of Poe worshippers, and for the same reasons. Finally, to return to Annie Trumbull Slosson and her “Botany Bay” one last time – this is, after all, where the present Atlantic crossing started – it seems that Baalam Montmorency’s weird story has an unusually metafictional aspect, too, shedding light on the evolution of its own genre. In a way, under the circumstances, it is also an interpretant of Lovecraft and Grabiński in its own right. Indeed, they were not twins, but they were “*each other*, don’t you see?” (Slosson 1969: 65).

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