Materialist Vitalism or Pathetic Fallacy: The Case of the House of Usher

Notoriously weird things occur in Edgar Allan Poe’s world, things in fact so bizarre that some readers dismiss them as mere exaggerations, whereas for others they amount to philosophical dilettantism. The list of the weird occurrences in Poe is long, but perhaps most famously: human wills are rendered so powerful that they transport the dead back to life; matter is able to transcend decay, whereas dead bodies, even when dismembered, pulsate with vitality; spirited forces—from minds to presumed supernatural agencies—are endowed with power to generate physical phenomena, such as inarticulate sounds and styled whispers, or to affect the physical by animating or stalling its motion, altering its figuration through various mergings and disseminations of particles of matter. Additionally, the natural and material is afforded immanent life, enabling it to become otherwise without any intervention by divine powers or by anything immaterial at all. Thus, stones and rocks sometimes feel and experience, plants are said to enjoy or suffer, and even planets and elements, as the end of Poe’s prose poem *Eureka* postulates, are found to be happy and joyous.

How, then, are we to understand such instances? A long tradition of critical reading has explained away Poe’s allegedly weird preoccupations by classifying them as gothic devices mobilized to fuse the strange with the pleasing and to appease the morbid by styling it into the fantastic, while simultaneously spellbinding the reader by means of the cultivated terror Poe depicts. But as I will be arguing, that approach—which reads Poe as a romance-goth—is weak, because it reduces to the aesthetic phenomena...
that are in fact often scientific, summoned by Poe from domains as different as biology, geology, astronomy, or medicine. For instance, when the claim that death is a radically slowed-down life is taken not as scientific but as a narratological device allowing the dead to revisit the living, and thus generate horror, the aesthetic is made to function as a normalizing shield protecting a dualistic ontology (which posits the divide between spiritual and material, takes matter to be inert, and establishes clear taxonomical topographies that separate beings into their proper existential niches). In that way we are assured that Poe’s anomalous worlds are not really anomalous but merely abstractly or aesthetically so. By ideating and thus anesthetizing Poe’s propositions, the “aesthetic” approach—where aestheticization refers to the content of his narratives, not to their form—weakens the challenge those propositions pose to Western ontology, making us overlook just how seriously Poe was invested in critiquing it, dedicated, as Joan Dayan has argued, to “debunk[ing] the cant of idealism.”¹ That tradition of criticism turns into “romance” his deadly serious ontology, which, Dayan claims, is monistic (enabling the “convertibility” of spiritual into material), committed to “a radically physical world,” and so “attach[ed] to materiality” that even if there are “phantoms and rarified presences” in his stories “they are always seen through or next to the collateral flesh and blood remnants.”² As I will argue here, this commitment to the physical, which Poe’s ontology understands as inherently vital, manifests as a ceaseless experiment with processes of becoming and transformation, whichundoestheexistentialstatusquoofbeingsandpersons. His propositions thus resist being aestheticized as romance, for as Dayan also argued, “‘romance’ . . . always serves the status quo” by “mythologiz[ing] an inwardsness,” whereas Poe shatters the coherence of any inwardsness, reducing it to the material supposedly external to it.³ Finally, and most straightforwardly, the anesthetization of Poe’s narratives, their domestication as aestheticized gothic allegories, must be resisted also because a lot of what he wrote enacts strange ontologies without ever rendering them gothic. (What, for instance, is specifically gothic about paranoid obsessions, perverse desires, or even feeling plants?)

Another way to answer the question of how to understand instances in Poe’s world that counteract our sense of taxonomic order—what can reasonably be called human, what belongs to life and what to death, what to animals and what to plants, all of which Poe systematically destabilizes—would perhaps be to agree to find in them expressions of what, barely a decade after Poe’s death, John Ruskin termed “pathetic fallacy.” In 1942, Josephine Miles interpreted Ruskin’s term as the attribution of the “powers of human nature” to the inhuman and, more specifically, “the attribution of feelings to things,” ascribing the “powers of emotion and passion, which are most central to the
‘pathetic,’” to what can’t feel or sense.⁴ Miles’s definition of Ruskin’s concept has since then settled into a cliché, so much so that contemporary handbooks of rhetoric and reference websites routinely repeat a version of it. Thus, as we have come to inherit it, the pathetic fallacy “is a literary device that attributes human qualities and emotions to inanimate objects of nature,” or, on Wikipedia’s account, “a literary term...attributing...human emotion and conduct to all aspects within nature. It is a kind of personification that is found in poetic writing when, for example, clouds seem sullen, when leaves dance, or when rocks seem indifferent.”⁵ More nuanced readings of Ruskin emphasize his differentiation between two different types of emotional falseness, the “fallacy of wilful fancy,” which included transmission of passions or feelings to the inhuman with “no real expectation that it will be believed” (PF), and which interested him less, and the “fallacy caused by an excited state of the feelings, making us, for the time, more or less irrational” (PF). In this second instance, the fallacy is not intended, but results from a “cheating of the fancy” (PF), leading the poet erroneously to believe that the unbelievable can be trusted, that the passions and animation of the inanimate and senseless that are observed by his exaggerated mind can indeed be experienced by others, and thus rendered truthful, if successfully translated into verse.⁶

What has been lost in these interpretations of Ruskin’s description of the pathetic fallacy is Ruskin’s understanding of it. That is perhaps not surprising, since the ontology formulated by the first three paragraphs of his “Of the Pathetic Fallacy” chapter of Modern Painters undoes the very fallacy Ruskin then goes on to formulate. As of paragraph four of the chapter, Ruskin indeed begins to talk about the falseness of will and feelings—hence about ways in which the mental errs on the side of the insensitive—but its first three paragraphs formulate an ontology in which the difference between subjects and objects, or persons and things, is rejected as itself erroneous, thus canceling the divide on which the “emotional falseness” Ruskin goes on to formulate relies in the first place. Far from insisting that ascribing a subject’s affectivity to objects is fallacious, Ruskin opens his chapter by insisting on the annulment of the taxonomy that separates extants into subjects and objects. His argument is that the taxonomy presuming the personification of things to be false is itself a conceptual artifact generated by the metaphysics of Immanuel Kant’s speculative idealism. Thus the divide between living subjects and inert objects can be called an “accurate” classification of phenomena only within the ontology outlined by Kant. But because for Ruskin that ontology is a mere metaphysical bluff, its taxa count as fabulated, and hence to say that something is “subjective” verges on meaninglessness: “German dullness, and English affectation, have of late much multiplied among us the use of two of the most objectionable words that were ever coined by the
troublesomeness of metaphysicians—namely, ‘Objective,’ and ‘Subjective.’ No words can be more exquisitely, and in all points, useless; and I merely speak of them that I may, at once and for ever, get them out of my way” (PF). But Ruskin’s dismissal is not merely declarative, for he does move on from that first offensive position to propose a more nuanced critique of Kant’s division of phenomena into subjects and objects. In his view, that division suffers from a triple fallaciousness. It is fallacious because in famously proposing that we can’t reach things “as they are in themselves” (PF), emancipated from the perspective of our perceptions, Kant simultaneously proposes that the content of perceptions is irrecoverably subjective, which renders perception purely mental, generated by the action of the perceiver of things. Second, it is fallacious because in making the qualities that the perceiver observes purely subjective—claiming that the color blue, for instance, is in the eye of the observer, not in the object observed—things are reduced to being merely dull primary qualities, turning them into imperceptible clusters of monochromatic and noiseless mass. And third, because in positing that the truth dwells in perceptions and qualities deriving from the subject, and thereby reducing what is material and nonhuman to how it is sensed by the human, the fallacy of exaggerating and aggrandizing the subjective to the point of egotism is committed, nominating the subject as both source and arbiter of the real. This is how Ruskin formulates that triple falseness:

The word “Blue,” say certain philosophers, means the sensation of colour which the human eye receives in looking at the open sky, or at a bell gentian.

Now, say they farther, as this sensation can only be felt when the eye is turned to the object, and as, therefore, no such sensation is produced by the object when nobody looks at it, therefore the thing, when it is not looked at, is not blue. . . . To be sweet, a thing must have a taster; it is only sweet while it is being tasted. . . .

And then they agree that the qualities of things which thus depend upon our perception of them, and upon our human nature as affected by them, shall be called Subjective. . . .

From these ingenious views the step is very easy to a farther opinion, that it does not much matter what things are in themselves, but only what they are to us; and that the only real truth of them is their appearance to, or effect upon, us. From which position, with . . . much egotism, selfishness, shallowness, and impertinence, a philosopher may easily go so far as to believe . . . that everything in the world depends upon his seeing or thinking of it. (PF)

The interpretation of subjectivity in the final sentence, as solely responsible for seeing and thinking, reveals that the three errors Ruskin ascribes to German idealism and its English version, which he counts as a caricature, are not only epistemological (concerned with the cognitive status of perceptions) but also ontological (concerned with what counts as a world). Because Kant
makes the world dependent on subjectivity for its existence—inasmuch as the qualities of that world exist in the mind of the perceiving subject—his triple error is, on Ruskin’s understanding, the outcome of a more general Western metaphysical trust in sensuous and perceptive agency granted to the mental only, and a corollary belief in the inherent inertia of the material. All three errors are thus predicated on an ontology that nominates psyches as the only powers capable of generating sensations, perceptions, and thoughts as forces singularly capable of manufacturing secondary qualities, from colors and sounds to warmth and odors (“no such sensation is produced by the object when nobody looks at it, therefore the thing, when it is not looked at, is not blue... To be sweet, a thing must have a taster”). Such a mainstream ontological way of relating to the world is “troublesome” to Ruskin, the trouble being its confusing the site of perception’s existence with the power to produce it, as well as its ascribing both to humanized psyches.

On Ruskin’s account, however, where perception is produced is strictly different from its final location. That there is a perception of a blue gentian in an eye doesn’t at all entail that the eye has generated it:

Be it observed that the word “Blue” does not mean the sensation caused by a gentian on the human eye; but it means the power of producing that sensation; and this power is always there, in the thing, whether we are there to experience it or not, and would remain there though there were not left a man on the face of the earth. A gentian does not produce the sensation of blueness if you don’t look at it. But it has always the power of doing so; its particles being everlastingly so arranged by its Maker. And, therefore, the gentian and the sky are always verily blue.

Hence I would say to these philosophers: If, instead of using the sonorous phrase, “It is objectively so,” you will use the plain old phrase, “It is so;” and if instead of the sonorous phrase, “It is subjectively so,” you will say, in plain old English, “It does so,”...you will, on the whole, be more intelligible. (PF)

Dividing extants between doers and nondoers not only renders porous the divide between persons and things but also, more radically, challenges the distinction between inanimate and animate. For what Western metaphysics counts as purely objective (his examples are nonpsychic, even inanimate and unorganized phenomena, such as the “thing,” “earth,” “sky,” “gentian”) becomes in Ruskin’s world actant. Things, oceans, and flowers are not simply moved by other objects according to the laws of physics; rather, they possess “the power of producing... [the] sensation” in another extant of qualities that inherently reside in them. They are thus generative forces, both active (they “do so”) and activating (when the gentian is looked at it generates its sensation in the eye of the observer, activating its senses: “A gentian does not produce the sensation of blueness if you don’t look at it. But it has always the power of doing so”). Oppositely, a sensation becomes a passive outcome of the action of a thing’s particles on a person, and that person is, as a result,
rendered an “it” that merely “is so,” a nonactive surface exposed to affections generated by the deeds of that same thing. And since the divide is between activity and passivity rather than between persons and things or subjects and objects, the same dynamic of affecting and being affected applies equally to strictly human interactions and interactions among nonhuman beings and phenomena. According to this ontological scenario, then, the encounter of two persons would not involve a person but the action of eyes, arms, or hair color—possessing their own qualities and hence the power to have them sensed—that generate sensations of themselves in the senses of another; the sensations of one would produce the deeds of another. And the same would be true among nonhuman extants. For since on Ruskin’s account everything owns its secondary qualities, everything has the power to generate sensations of itself. No ontological norm posited by Ruskin prohibits the occurrence of sensuous relations between nonhuman extants. To the contrary, his ontological platform allows for a plant to produce the sensation of its greenness on another plant, and even for a gray stone to actively generate the sensation of its grayness on the moss growing on it. Things, stones, plants, animals, and humans are all agents with the power to manufacture sensations of themselves in others. And conversely, they are all subject to experiencing other beings according to the way they are acted upon. Thus, everybody is conjured to see things in a certain way, while simultaneously conjuring the ways that others perceive.

Even if he doesn’t mention Ruskin, Kenneth Burke’s discussion of the pathetic fallacy in *A Grammar of Motives* is a panic-stricken reaction to the former essay’s subversiveness. For Burke’s main question is not whether one can assign feelings to objects or mindless beings such as flowers, but whether all motion can be counted as sensuous action, as Ruskin proposed, making it vital rather than simply mechanical. The way we have come to commonly understand the pathetic fallacy, exemplified by Josephine Miles’s understanding of it as attributing “emotion to an object,” resides on a firm divide between feeling subject and inert object, which Burke calls the strict “scene-agent ratio” characteristic of the lyric, where strictness refers to the divide between impersonal or “scenic” and personal or “psychic.” On this account, everything that moves, but is impersonal—wind, rivers, leaves, grass, trees, birds—is purely objective and scenic. However, Burke’s claim is that such motion can’t be understood as the agency Ruskin posited, because agency must be marked by personalized feelings (only “personal feelings, or attitudes . . . are properties of agents”), whereas trees, grass, and flowers are clearly selfless, and therefore can’t pass for agents despite being mobile. Thus, Miles’s understanding of the pathetic fallacy reveals to Burke that in order for the strict divide between subjects and objects to be affirmed
and maintained, as Burke wishes ("not that we would object to the limitations she has imposed. On the contrary"), the pathetic fallacy requires clear definition of the difference between action and motion: it requires not an aesthetic, but an ontological decision regarding who or what will be called an agent, a person, and a feeling life.\(^7\)

To suggest—as Ruskin clearly did—that every movement constitutes action is to posit a nondualistic ontology that ascribes sensuousness to matter and materiality to affectivity, making everything sensuous equally capable of being a person or thing. For Ruskin, there is no operative difference between personal and impersonal, action and motion, since everything has the capacity to generate perception of itself, just as everything has the power to endure it. All phenomena have the power to either “act” or simply “be,” which has a disorienting effect for, as Burke puts it again, tacitly referring to Ruskin, if “you include also . . . the personalizing of impersonal motions you have no clear way of knowing when a given motion is personalized and when it is not.”\(^8\) Everything threatens to become a person, and that, to Burke, is an awesome eventuality. The only way to save ourselves from the threat of monism—a threat that Burke calls the “materialist reduction” because it weakens the fixed taxonomies that keep subjects at bay from objects, making objects convertible into selves—is to reaffirm dualism, which turns whole realms of phenomena, from elements to plants, into dead mechanisms, mobile but lacking agency, mere instruments moved by spirited agents, impersonal tools in the service of mental selves: “The realm of motion is . . . par excellence the realm of instruments. No instrument can record or gauge anything in the realm of action (‘ideas’).”\(^9\) What started as a claim about feelings (“personal feelings . . . are properties of agents”) reveals itself to be a claim about ideas, “action” now being defined as a property of those who are endowed with “ideas.” By surreptitiously reducing the question of affects to that of thoughts—tacitly positing that to ask who has affects is in fact to ask who thinks—Burke finds a way to restrict the category of agents and hence persons to anthropomorphic thinking things. In so doing, he implies that to observe the criteria of the pathetic fallacy that he is formulating, one must be guilty of a \textit{cogitative fallacy}. Persons are therefore anthropomorphized, and humans are rendered the sole manufacturers of ideation and abstraction (hence his circular claim that a moving but not acting being can “record anything in the realm of action” only “insofar” as it is a “subject,” that is, only if it is not a being in motion but an agent, which he calls “homo dialecticus,” the bearer of “consciousness”).\(^10\) This circularity, which confirms a person as René Descartes’s \textit{res cogitans} and thereby reasserts idealism, is on Burke’s account comparable to the stability of physical laws, since the dualism on which it feeds and that affords exceptional status to the agency of human minds can’t be altered or transcended. This is how Burke explains it:
Our approach forces us to face again the philosophic issue that arose with Cartesian dualism. Many of our best naturalist philosophers seem to be drawing doctrinal sustenance from unrecognized effects of the pathetic fallacy as we have here extended it to cover the action-motion ambiguity. Hence, condemning materialistic reduction, they can speak hopefully of a vocabulary midway between “mind” and “body” (or midway between the terms for the act of “consciousness” and the terms for the scenic “conditions” of those manifestations we call consciousness). We need not dare to say that such a vocabulary cannot be found. We need only say that, whenever it seems to be found, you are admonished to be on the look-out for the covert workings of the action-motion ambiguity.11

Thus every proposal—such as Ruskin’s—that situates itself “midway” between scenes and minds and accords impersonal phenomena agency can be convincing only “seemingly,” not really, since Cartesian dualism simply can’t be cancelled; a new ontological vocabulary overcoming what Burke sees as the “action-motion ambiguity” simply “cannot be found.” The world is apodictically dualistic, divided between the actors and mobiles, minds and matter moved by them.

However, it is precisely such an ontology that affords vital agency to what is impersonal and even inanimate, as proposed by Ruskin and dismissed by Burke, that is staged in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), where it is summoned not from philosophy but from the resources of contemporary natural sciences.12 Usher’s world is thoroughly vital and sensuous. If human death—for instance, that of his sister Madeline—is notoriously revealed in it as simply life that has slowed down to miniscule and imperceptible motions, it is because nothing dies there. Not only plants, lowly organisms, mushrooms, and other cryptogamic minutiae but also rocks, stones, air, water, window glass, curtains, wooden objects, lamps, doors, and musical instruments are enlivened, possessing the vital capacity to self-transform, sense, and enact sensations; they are not simply mobile in Burke’s sense, but rather actors in Ruskin’s sense, endowed with sensuousness and capable of generating perceptions of their own qualities in others. Now that capability might not be obvious to common perception, which registers certain of those slow changes as immobility, but it is to be presumed that extraordinarily subtle sense would detect its vital activity experientially. Usher has such refined perceptual capacities, enabling him to sense the actual livelihood of objects routinely classified as dead or inorganic and rendering his vitalistic theory of matter, which he relates to the narrator, neither abstract nor delusional but empirical. As the narrator reconstructs, it is precisely that ardent perception that allows Usher to observe the slight motion of the “gray stones of the home of his forefathers” (FHU, 209), which serves as a factual basis for his
“earnest . . . persuasion” that the “sentience” afforded “to all vegetable things” (FHU, 208) “trespasses, under certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization” (FHU, 209). As the narrator clarifies, “The conditions of the sentience had been here, [Usher] imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones—in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many fungi, which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around—above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn. Its evidence—the evidence of the sentience—was to be seen, he said. . . in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls” (FHU, 209). Usher perceives all phenomena to be entangled in a continuous field of living matter, where they simultaneously affect and are affected, existing in a condition of agency and exposed to it. For he perceives everything as an arrangement of stones filigreed with the vegetal networks of fungi and surrounded by the still waters of a basin, creating an ecosystem whose stagnation, warmth, and condensation literally or “chemically” enliven the geological and the elemental (condensation of the air) in such a manner that their minute sensorious animation acts on him, making him the patient receiver of their “silent, yet, importunate influence” (FHU, 209).

Poe does say that Usher’s perception is “morbid,” but, conversely, he doesn’t really want us to disqualify it as delusional. In order that we take this all-encompassing sensoriousness seriously, Poe has the narrator himself, presumably a man of “vigorous” senses, perceive the vitality of Usher’s estate and report how affected he is by its influence. The narrator admits that he had “so worked upon [his] imagination as really to believe” that Usher’s whole property is alive, that “about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere. . . which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor. . . faintly discernible, and leaden-hued” (FHU, 201). The closer he looked, the more he was overwhelmed with the “vivid force of the sensations” that “increased [his] superstition” about the livelihood of the domain, for he too observed the processes of condensation, evaporation, and stagnation, which in Usher’s view generated life, as merging phenomena into a closed system (“peculiar to itself”) capable of self-organization. His “superstition” regarding the agency of the terrain increases, and in order to shake off “the force of the sensations which oppressed” him, he “scan[s] more narrowly the real aspect of the building” but perceives yet again the same entangled and living ecosystem, in which various beings and phenomena form continuous, affective, vital fields of matter. Once his imagination is appeased, his calmed perception sees the property in this way:
Its principal feature seemed to be that of excessive antiquity. . . Minute fungi over-
spread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all
this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had
fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adap-
tation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there
was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has
rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath
of the external air. (FHU, 201)

Thanks to the microclimate of this self-sustaining basin, stones are as if
living beings, transformed into porous wood in the process of rotting, but
serving as a fertile soil for growing cryptogams, which themselves weave
“fine tangled web-work” that expands into the masonry, functioning like
the veins of its enlivening. The whole domain—the house, the organisms on
it, the trees around it—thus becomes a single rhizomatic vital being, an
integrated topography of primary, lower life perceived at the moment of its
emergence, created by the atmospheric and geological condition of the
tarn. It affects the narrator’s perceptions not only by virtue of a chemical
causality (via its “leaden-hued” vapors), but also physically, by its “reverber-
ating” and slight “crumbling” (FHU, 201, 215, 201).

Although the narrator’s perceptual corroboration of Usher’s “acute”
perceptions produces a description of the tarn’s biosystem that de facto
cancels their “morbidity,” he nevertheless considers the vitalist ontology
that Usher predicates on those perceptions to be extravagant, suggesting
that he would never go so far as to afford affectivity to the geological. On his
account, Usher’s theory ascribing affectivity to unorganized phenomena is
“more daring in character” (FHU, 209), even utterly idiosyncratic, for while
“other men have thought . . . the sentience of all vegetable things” (FHU,
208), Usher alone renders stones sensuous. As the short footnote that the
narrator adds to the text specifies, “other men” had already proposed the
sentient agency of “all vegetable things,” such as the English physician and
naturalist Thomas Percival, the Italian biologist Lazzaro Spallanzani, and
the British chemist Richard Watson (in his “Chemical Essays,” referenced by
the narrator as An Essay on the Subject of Chemistry, and Their General Division).
But the narrator’s suggestion that the three vitalists he directs us to have not
claimed vitality for unorganized matter is misleading, and a reader who was
to check its accuracy would find that Usher’s theory, far from being “more
daring,” in fact quotes directly from the current scientific understanding of
matter. The three scientists the narrator references slightly differ in their
understanding of matter’s vitality. For Percival, Usher’s claim might sound
too daring, since he is indeed more preoccupied with an effort to destabilize
the taxonomical borders separating animal from vegetal than those sepa-
rating vegetal from mineral. Identifying instances of vegetal sensitivity, he
concluded that life understood as the capacity to perceive (as manifesting a “degree of perceptivity”) does belong to the vegetal, but he remained uncertain whether the same might be proposed for the mineral. More radically than Percival, Spallanzani argued that the inorganic could be rendered vital but only under certain circumstances and for a limited period of time; but he left the question of its vitality undecided. More radically still, Richard Watson ascribed vital agency and perceptiveness to all extants including geological phenomena, from stones to sand and minerals. Usher will quote his examples almost verbatim, raising the question of whether his experience of his house’s livelihood should remain a fiction and be declared guilty of the pathetic fallacy or, to the contrary, afforded scientific status.

For Watson, professor of chemistry at Cambridge, Usher’s statement couldn’t be more scientific. On his account, “Naturalists, as well as Chemists, have perhaps too precipitately embraced the opinion, that Minerals may be certainly and readily distinguished from the other two kingdoms... of a vegetable and an animal,” since the list of instances scientifically corroborating the vitality of the geological is long.14 That stones, ores, and minerals should be understood as taxa of vegetal life is proven to him by the fact that when “dug out of quarries” or “mines” they are “like the dead branches or limbs of vegetables or animals, incapable of receiving increase, except from an external incrustation,” whereas while they remain integrated in quarries they extend their “parts” by “internal assimilation” or growth. That shows that they are nurtured by their surrounds just as plants are (SC, 36). Mines and tarns in general, whose absence of ventilation and stagnant air—such as characterizes Usher’s tarn—turns them into damp microclimatic zones that feed geological life, constitute environments in which the vegetation of stones especially abounds. Watson offers the example of the “mines of Chremnitz in Hungary, which have been wrought for above one thousand years, the ancient roads which had been cut through the rocks are left to grow up”; moreover, Giorgio Baglivi, the solidist physician “observed the same phenomenon... in the marble quarries in Italy,” proving that in isolated biomilieus such as quarries, basins, mines, or tarns, stones reveal their vegetal nature (SC, 36). Stalactites, similarly, corroborate the vegetal nature of the geological, for the “concentrick crusts, of which [they] consist, are not either in their appearance, or their formation... unlike the circles annually produced by the stagnation of the sap in the boll and branches of trees” (SC, 38); like minerals and stones, stalactites also grow, albeit slowly, making it difficult for Watson to maintain the difference between stones and trees. Even gold and silver belong to a family of stony trees, for “they appear to burst through the hardest rocks,” indicating “a kind of vegetation in their formation” and explaining...
why “from their great resemblance to trees [they] have been called by some arborescent” (SC, 38). Other metals too display arborescent life; for instance, when “lead” is exposed to heat—the same lead that is said to “hue” the atmosphere of Usher’s domain on which so many “decayed trees” spread—it burns like “rotten wood” (SC, 35), proving to Watson that its “inner” nature is tree-like. Similarly, “rock crystals, amethyst, and various precious stones” are proven by the Flemish naturalist Anselmus De Boodt (in The History of Gems and Stones, 1609), to “grow like mushrooms” (SC, 38), a finding that finally convinces Watson that while geological phenomena might differ among themselves as much as mushrooms differ from trees, they are nevertheless forms of plant life, subspecies of fungi and therefore alive, even if not always organized. As Watson put it, the “inward constitution of the globe . . . internal structure of the earth . . . scales of a fish, the feathers of a bird . . . minerals . . . all the strata of limestones, chalks, marbles, all gypsums, spars, alabasters . . . the strata of pit-coal, and of all bituminous fossils . . . the mould everywhere covering the surface of the earth . . . all matter is . . . enlivened, animated” (SC, 39–40).

For Watson, this continuum of living matter is total; it includes all phenomena from stones to humans, with nothing in it being isolated from anything else by the boundaries of its own taxon. Moreover, empirically speaking, supposed taxonomical boundaries are nonexistent, since the world is an affective and vital string of heterogeneous beings capable of acting on each other and being mutually modified by such action precisely because their figuration is porous. In Watson’s science, taxa are a nuisance; he views the “systematic distinction, and specific divisions of things” as “useful” only “in enlarging the comprehension of the mind by methodizing the objects” but “having no real foundation in nature” (SC, 13). Nature doesn’t recognize “specific divisions of things” since in it each individual is a permeable extant whose borders fade into the background continuum of living matter, bringing into the same existential vicinity phenomena as diverse as a dog and a tree: “Every one thinks that he knows what an animal is, and how it is contradistinguished from a vegetable, and would be offended at having his knowledge questioned thereupon. A dog or a horse he is truly persuaded, are beings as clearly distinguished from an herb or a tree, as light is from darkness; yet as in these, so in the production of nature, the transition from one to the other is effected by imperceptible gradations” (SC, 13–14). Through those imperceptible gradations, which make it difficult to clearly demarcate between a dog and a tree, one phenomenon passes into another so that mineral, stone, and metal become related to the human, for “men and minerals and all intermediate existences are bound together” (SC, 40).

However, and crucially relevant for understanding the scientific background to Usher’s theories, the continuity between mineral and man is on
Watson’s account not only historical or “evolutionary” but also synchronic or ecological. Synchronic continuity is necessitated by what Watson claims to be the quintessential attribute of life, which is the capacity of matter neither to form nor to spontaneously strive—both of them being life’s secondary characteristics—but to perceive. As Watson explicitly puts it, “Rejecting spontaneous motion and figural boundedness as very inadequate tests of animality, we adopt perception in their stead” (SC, 15). And since for Watson “all matter is... enlivened,” all matter is also perceptive, and therefore active. For to say that each being is endowed with perception is to posit that it possesses the power to create that perception. Through such creativity, it shows itself capable of actively affecting not only itself but also other surrounding beings. All existences that perceive are therefore actants rather than mechanical mobiles, and not only every member of the animal kingdom but also “every part of the vegetable kingdom” (SC, 18) as well as “strata of stones, and veins of minerals” (SC, 39) have “acute perception,” “a degree of perceptivity” (SC, 18) that makes them able to vitally relate, through their interaction with one another that takes place at any given point of time, and across species and categories.

Usher’s philosophy, which ascribes to life the status of “inorganization,” far from being the peculiar expression of his radicalism, is in fact an adequate summary of current scientific vitalist theories. Once it is transplanted to Usher’s particular domain, Watson’s claim that everything is animated by perception comes to mean, as in the narrative, that the terrain on which the house stands, stones and their other growths (fungi and rotten trees), the atmosphere, and minds all perceive that they have the capacity to generate and receive sensations, to stir and be stirred, not simply through the mechanical pressure of their embodied milieu, but by their own force of sensing. Usher’s “domain,” which is “peculiar to itself” because it is insulated in a tarn-milieu, thus emerges as one of Watson’s mine-atmospheres superbly fitted for nurturing “stone vegetation.” We come to understand that in Usher’s world everything is a form of sensuous vegetal life, from stones to old and rotten wood (“the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault”), to mushrooms and even lead that hues the atmosphere. All of those life forms, according to this rigorously circular eco-logic, transform themselves into one another: seeming inanimate stones grow mushrooms or appear as rotting trees that are themselves, however, not in a state of “dilapidation,” but rather a sequence in the growth of geological vegetation.

Moreover, Poe’s narrator also affirms Watson’s double perceptual streams, both historic (the gradual and continuous transformation of simple into complex life forms) and ecologically lateral (the actual capacity of
unorganized or vegetal life to act on complex beings), when he posits a literal continuity between the house and its past inhabitants as well as between the house and its current inhabitants. Previous and present occupants become “so identified [with the mansion]...as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the ‘House of Usher’” with the “people” living in it, which explains why the “peasantry” used the appellation to designate “both the family and the family mansion” (FHU, 201). And while, as G. R. Thompson accurately observes, the narrator here “senses something puzzling or uncertain in the naming of the house as physical building and the ‘house’ as family,” this ontological disorientation is not caused, as Thompson proposes, by the narrator’s realization that there exists “an occult relation between the family of Usher and the seemingly sentient physical building which is mysteriously tied in with their fate” (FHU, 201). Rather, according to the scientific ontology of Poe’s story, the building is not “seemingly” but really sensuous, and the relations between the house and the man are not occult but material, in line with Watson’s scientifically grounded claim that “God hath established an uninterrupted concatenation in all his works.” For Watson, “uninterrupted concatenation” means that if we perceive “different individuals...mingled together into the same species” and “different species into the same genus,” and “different genera into the same kingdom,” it is not because they are really severed, in which case the perception of continuity between them would indeed be occult, but because our visual perception is not refined enough to discern that they are indeed materially “bounded” by “lines [of matter]...too minute for our observation” (SC, 40). But Poe endows Usher precisely with Watson’s fine perception, which enables Usher to discern all matter as perceiving, and gives him accurate insight into the real as a “bounded” network of vital relations (Watson’s “lines”), which are at the same time embodied streams of perception. Usher’s subtlety, then, provides a superior or true ontological insight that reveals the difference between stones and humans as one of fine gradations in the intensity of perception or sensation they are able to generate, and, through this production of the perceptual, they manifest themselves as agents affecting other extants. In the world of Usher’s science—as in the ontology Ruskin would later propose—there are no beings that exist simply as subjects having objects at their disposal, just as there are no phenomena chronically doomed to inert thingness. Instead, all phenomena exist as spots on physical continua where they are capable, whether simultaneously or successively, of being both patients and agents, actually acting on other phenomena that they in turn suffer. Such is Usher’s ontological condition also, for he continuously perceives his passive exposure to stones’ perceptual agencies, which influence and mold him into an agent, revealing him to be a chronic fusion of agency and patiency. For instance, he
observes that the “influence” of drops of water emerging on the walls of his mansion through the process of “condensation” “molds” him into “what he was” (FHU, 209); similarly, he is (patiently) under “impressions” that the mere “substance” of his house, “the physique of the gray walls and turrets” materializes “influences” the “morale of his existence,” fashioning its acts (FHU, 204). Appearing under a variety of conditions—from elemental to mental—the perceptiveness of matter renders Poe’s world vital and relational, its main ontological divide passing not between persons and things but between agents and patients, yet simultaneously being so unstable that patients easily intensify into agents and agencies are molded by patients. Poe depicts a world in accord with Ruskin’s request that instead of being divided into subjects and objects everything should be regarded as acting or acted upon, which cancels Burke’s criteria for judging the pathetic fallacy, for in this nondualistic ontology that affords feelings to all extants, there is nothing that simply moves, but everything has the capacity to act.

Notes

2. Ibid., 15, 9.
3. Ibid., 15.
6. For the more nuanced definitions I have in mind here, see M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. (Boston, 1999), 2–3, 204: “A phrase invented by John Ruskin in 1856 to signify any representation of inanimate natural objects that ascribes to them human capabilities, sensations, and emotions... As used by Ruskin—for whom ‘truth’ was a primary criterion of art—the term was derogatory; for, he claimed, such descriptions do not represent the ‘true appearances of things to us’ but ‘the extraordinary, or false appearances, when we are under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy.’ Two of Ruskin’s examples are the lines ‘The spendthrift crocus, bursting through the mould / Naked and shivering, with his cup of gold,’ and Coleridge’s description in ‘Christabel’ of ‘The one red leaf, the last of its clan, / That dances as often as dance it can.’”
8. Ibid., 234.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 234, 235.
11. Ibid., 234–35.


15. A continuum, as Gilles Deleuze explains in his lectures on G. W. Leibniz—whose philosophy of continuity, according to G. R. Thompson, also influenced Poe’s thinking about the relationship between Usher and his house (see editor’s note, FHU, 204)—is assured by “infinitely small [imperceptible] relations between two elements.” According to Leibniz’s law of continuity, two phenomena will thus be continuous not because they lack individuation but because the differences constituting individuations are “evanescent,” fading away into something else at the edges; hence, Deleuze’s definition of continuity as “evanescent difference,” where evanescence names the imperceptible passing of differentiations from one individuation to another. See Gilles Deleuze, “Cours Vincennes 29/04/1980,” trans. Charles J. Stivale, *Les Cours de Gilles Deleuze*, https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/55.