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THE GROTESQUE AS MORAL AESTHETIC: A STUDY OF THE TALES OF  
EDGAR ALLAN POE

A DISSERTATION  
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BY  
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1967

THE GROTESQUE AS MORAL AESTHETIC: A STUDY OF THE TALES  
OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

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THE GROTESQUE AS MORAL AESTHETIC: A STUDY OF THE TALES OF  
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Poe so thoroughly emancipated himself from the current American vogue of evaluating literature according to didactic or moral qualities that his aestheticism went to the other extreme of "art for art sake" which made pure subjectivism acceptable as art.<sup>1</sup>

Poe does not touch morality. Although his aesthetic theory admits that goodness may be a by-product of art, he himself does not look for it. Sin and crime are absent from this part of his universe; and the terrible deeds that abound there are matters of psychology, abnormal psychology, not of ethics. Natural laws apply, working through human nature; the moral law does not apply.<sup>2</sup>

The above excerpts crystallize attitudes on Edgar Allan Poe which have not as yet vanished from the general critical consensus. The first excerpt supports a view, not as commonly held as it once was, that Poe's art was meant to please rather than instruct. The second excerpt insists on the idea, still current, that Poe, because he is so obviously concerned with abnormal men and their psychological states, shows virtually no interest in ethical and moral questions. This study is concerned with both matters, which

are, in essence, really one: Poe's art and its essentially ethical character. More specifically, this dissertation will discuss one major component of his aesthetics, the grotesque, the basic source of horror and humor in the fiction, and its moral and ethical function. Eventually, I hope to demonstrate that Poe, in his evocation of the grotesque, creates what might be called a moral aesthetic: that is, the use of horror and humor for the purpose of evaluating man and society.

Critics have generally departed from the view presented by Yvor Winters that Poe's fiction is characterized by an absence of theme. Winters writes that ". . . we see the story-teller, like the poet, interested primarily in the creation of emotion for its own sake, not in the understanding of experience."<sup>3</sup> Poe himself is responsible for fostering this view because of his pronouncements in "The Philosophy of Composition," as well as in other essays, which emphasize the importance of effect, e.g., the elevation of the soul and the contemplation of the beautiful.<sup>4</sup> In the "Poetic Principle," for instance, Poe repudiates the heresy of The Didactic and takes issue with the notion that every poem should have a moral. Doubtless, the most damaging remarks that Poe makes regarding a specific form of didacticism, allegory, occur in his essay on Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales:

The deepest emotion aroused within us by the happiest allegory, as allegory, is a very, very imperfectly satisfied sense of the writer's ingenuity in

overcoming a difficulty we should preferred his not having attempted to overcome. The fallacy of the idea that allegory, in any of its moods, can be made to enforce a truth--that metaphor, for example, may illustrate as well as embellish an argument--could be promptly demonstrated; the converse of the supposed fact might be shown, indeed, with very little trouble. . . . (Works, XIII, 148)

Poe goes on in the same essay to call Pilgrim's Progress "a ludicrously over-rated book," but in his praise of De La Motte Fouqué, he indicates that he is not categorically against all allegory: "Of allegory properly handled, judiciously subdued, seen only as a shadow or by suggestive glimpses, and making its nearest approach to truth in a not obtrusive and therefore not unpleasant appositeness, the "Undine" of De La Motte Fouqué is the best, and undoubtedly a very remarkable specimen" (Works, XIII, 149). In an earlier essay on Twice-Told Tales, Poe had praised the "strong undercurrent of suggestion" (Works, XI, 107), an expression repeated in one form or another elsewhere in his criticism. Poe, in an almost grudging way, hints at an interest in theme and meaning, even though his vocabulary, e.g., "truth" and "strong undercurrent of suggestion," is admittedly vague. It is through his assertive pronouncements on unity of effect, and in his denigration of allegory, that Poe offers Winters some support for his position. Nevertheless, it is Edwin Honig, rather than Yvor Winters, who presents what has probably become a normative critical view of Poe:



. . . the novels and tales of Melville, Poe, Hawthorne and James, like the narrative poems of Coleridge, seem often to hide behind the fanciful, even when they are most serious. Generally in their work the qualities of elusiveness and understatement, of mystification and wit, presented in an excruciating tone of lightness that pretends to be a salutary suppression of the horrible and irrational, make for a growing tension that ultimately reveals the dead-seriousness behind the make-believe. These qualities, expressed in different ways by each of them, unite such writers on a common ground of symbolic intent; the same qualities also attract modern readers who see in them the essence of symbolic and allegorical art, without necessarily distinguishing between the two.<sup>5</sup>

That Poe cultivated a symbolic and allegorical vein is, by now, a matter of literary history and needs no further argument. The crucial question, and one that is open to debate, concerns the meaning of Poe's allegorical level and the extent to which it permeates the poetry and/or the fiction.

One major view of Poe's allegorical intent that I should like to consider is that of Richard Wilbur who has stated his position in three separate but closely related essays.<sup>6</sup> Wilbur's elucidation of Poe's central allegorical level rests on what is basically a dated, as well as an overstated, romantic archetype: the poet as escapist. The substance of his argument is that Poe had two great subjects: "first, the war between the poetic soul and the external world; second, the war between the poetic soul and the earthly self to which it is bound. All of Poe's major stories are allegorical representations of these conflicts, and everything he wrote bore somehow on them."<sup>7</sup> The result of such conflict, Wilbur feels, is ". . . the effort of the

poetic soul to escape all consciousness of the world in dream. . . ."8 The withdrawal of the romantic poet from an abrasive materialistic world is hardly a new idea, but Wilbur develops it with great ingenuity as it applies both to Poe's poetry and fiction, finding support for his thesis in one of Poe's recurrent symbols, the enclosure: whirlpools, tarns, decaying houses, secluded mansions. "When we find one of Poe's characters in a remote valley, or a claustral room," Wilbur remarks, "we know that he is in the process of dreaming his way out of the world."<sup>9</sup> My own interpretation of Poe's enclosures, and their function within the fiction, is essentially different from Wilbur's and will be taken up later in this study. More important, however, is my disagreement with Wilbur on the larger matter, the question of whether Poe is actually endorsing the kind of solipsism that he represents in the fiction.

Wilbur, it seems to me, is much too exclusive in his view of Poe as essentially a romantic-allegorical artist, and ignores the fact that there was also a more tough-minded Poe, a man who was a literary critic, a literary theorist, a social critic, as well as a popular author who occasionally satirized his own romantic themes and techniques. What he fails to see is that Poe the neo-classicist repudiates Poe the romanticist. Of the thirty-six stories I examine in the body of this dissertation almost all of them subscribe to a pattern that seems invariable: the protagonist who lives

within his own consciousness, who psychologically and spiritually isolates himself from his fellow men, is thwarted, punished, or made the object of satire. In fact, any form of perverted self-reliance, whether it comes from a withdrawal into an imaginative realm or through the arrogance of intellectual superiority, is ultimately repudiated. Admittedly, Poe's psychological portraits preempt our attention, but the fiction does not necessarily divorce Poe's psychological focus from a moral or ethical frame of reference. If Poe investigates what a man has become at a given point in his human and psychic history, he also implies, and in one instance states flatly, what man ought to be. I submit that the allegorical level in Poe's fiction was not written by a man who looked at the world only through romantic lenses; it is allegory that is informed with a moral point of view. If one side of Poe has been neglected in the polemics of criticism, it is the side of Poe that exists as a moral realist, an image that has yet to come into sharp critical focus.

Poe himself drew attention to the idea of the grotesque when he published his first collection of stories in 1840, Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque. In his Preface he asserts "the epithets 'Grotesque' and 'Arabesque' will be found to indicate with sufficient precision the prevalent tenor of the tales here published" (Works, I, 150). Poe's

remarks suggest that his terms have to do with tone, but precise distinctions between grotesque and arabesque have never been firmly settled.<sup>10</sup> Recently the term grotesque and a theory of the grotesque were explored in two major studies,<sup>11</sup> while other works, more narrow in scope, have also added to the literature of the subject. William Van O'Connor, for instance, has written of the grotesque as a distinctly American genre.<sup>12</sup> Edward Davidson, without really defining the term grotesque, uses it as a title of one of his chapters in Poe: A Critical Study, noting, along the way, however, that "Poe's grotesques were . . . rooted in the American pioneer tradition that feigned a seriousness which masked the absurdity just beneath the surface of the joke."<sup>13</sup> Dewayne Peterson, in an unpublished dissertation, concludes that Poe's grotesque effects, arising from improbabilities, exaggerations, and distortion, added to the special quality of Poe's humor.<sup>14</sup> My approach to the grotesque will be through an examination of plot and action. Putting aside all of the various definitions of the grotesque except one, I will attempt to show how the grotesque is expressed in the dramatic structure of Poe's fiction. For the purposes of this study the grotesque is to be defined strictly as a fusion of realms and categories or as an interpenetration of realms. Wolfgang Kayser sees the grotesque emerging as "a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separate from those of plants, animals, and human

beings. . . ."15 Similar conditions are at work in Poe's fiction. The violation of boundaries in the stories introduces a sense of the grotesque, usually experienced by the protagonist as terror, disorientation, and alienation from the traditional categories of reality: the dead come back to disturb the living, men take on the characteristics of animals or, conversely, animals take on the characteristics of men, individuals find themselves prematurely buried, or the dramatis personae may behave as though they were mechanisms. In nearly all cases the grotesque appears because the protagonist has violated the sanctity of another, his own human nature, or some implied moral law. He may appear Faustian or Byronic, but his arch romanticism is, in the gothic tales, self-destructive and mocked in those that are satiric.

The conditions of the grotesque, repeated from story to story, are in themselves expressive of a moral pattern insofar as they serve a punitive function, and suggest that Poe was in possession of a moral vision, unsteady and inconsistent as it sometimes may appear to be. At the same time, Poe remains a highly subjective writer, interested in playing with moods and motifs for their own sake, or for the pure emotional excitement they hold for the reader. Nowhere is this more evident than in four stories, "The Shadow" (1835), "Silence" (1838), "The Gold Bug" (1843), and "The Sphinx" (1845), which do not fall strictly within the categories of

the grotesque set up in the body of this study. In "The Shadow" and "Silence" plot is almost non-existent; both are merely mood sketches. In "The Gold Bug" and "The Sphinx" we have tales in the ratiocinative manner, Poe demonstrating his intellectual agility. All of them, however, have the special virtue of introducing Poe's preoccupation with the grotesque perspective.

In the first two stories, the narrators exist within a surrealistic universe, a nocturnal world that defies comprehension, and their communication with the reader is a chronicle of anxiety and dread. In "The Shadow" an alien presence enters into the narrator's visual perspective, but it eludes identification: "And lo! from among those sable draperies . . . there came forth a dark and undefined shadow--a shadow such as the moon, when low in heaven, might fashion from the figure of a man: but it was the shadow neither of man nor of God, nor of any familiar thing" (p. 458). Yet even before the shadow is actually seen it registers itself on the consciousness of the protagonist: "There were things around us and about of which I can render no distinct account--things material and spiritual--heaviness in the atmosphere--a sense of suffocation--anxiety--and, above all, that terrible state of existence which the nervous experience when the senses are keenly living and awake, and meanwhile the powers of thought lie dormant" (p. 457). In "Silence--A Fable" a demon speaks from a place in which

". . . there is no quiet . . . nor silence" (p. 459), a limbo world in which the normal operations of nature have been destroyed. The stories, typical of Poe's ability to create mood and atmosphere, do much more. They furnish a vision of the grotesque, the external world distorted beyond recognition, reshaped in the form of nightmare. In the major fiction, a version of this grotesque reality serves as an antagonist, Poe's version of the Furies, which afflicts many of his protagonists.

In "The Gold Bug," a completely plotted story, Poe provides a sardonic variation of the grotesque perspective. The protagonist, Legrand, a man who has lost his worldly fortune, must submit himself to the grotesque perspective in order to achieve a vision of the sublime, in literal terms, a buried treasure. Following an ancient parchment, he comes to a ledge called "'the devil's seat'," a precarious position from which he sights with a telescope a human skull, and it is from the eye of this skull that he must locate the source of his treasure. The sense of the grotesque is further intensified, however, by the discovery of decayed bones that lie on top of the new-found wealth. Thematically, the story suggests what Poe is up to in the stories of the first chapter: exploring the relationship of the grotesque to the sublime. "The Sphinx" is, perhaps, the most significant story of the four, since it foreshadows the nature of the grotesque perspective as it exists generally

in the stories of the categories. The narrator-protagonist is presented as excitable, gloomy, and superstitious. Having escaped the cholera plague in New York City for a pastoral refuge, he is a man who is predisposed to viewing the world as grotesque. Though he is distant geographically from the plague, he is obsessed with death and horror and experiences it in a waking vision: "My thoughts had been long wandering from the volume before me to the gloom and desolation of the neighboring city. Uplifting my eyes from the page, they fell upon the naked face of the hill, and upon an object--upon some living monster of hideous conformation. . . . But the chief peculiarity of this horrible thing was the representation of a Death's Head, which covered nearly the whole surface of its breast . . ." (p. 472). Here, the grotesque comes upon the protagonist because of a faulty visual perspective. His friend, serving as a human norm, possesses a different angle of vision. Sitting in the chair of the horrified spectator, the friend also encounters the grotesque, but it is drastically reduced in size and coolly examined: "'Ah, here it is . . . reascending the face of the hill, and a very remarkable looking creature I admit it to be. Still it is by no means so large or so distant as you imagined it; for the fact is that, as it wriggles its way up this thread, which some spider has wrought along the window-sash, I find it to be about the sixteenth of an inch



in its extreme length, and also about the sixteenth of an inch distant from the pupil of my eye'" (p. 474).

"The Sphinx" poses the twin conditions of the grotesque that exist within most of the stories of the categories: first the psychological (and in the later stories, moral) imbalance of the protagonist, culminating in his sinister vision; and, second, the sinister vision itself, the dramatic intrusion of the grotesque, as it manifests itself in the plot and action of the fiction. In the stories that are satiric, the vision of the grotesque is comic rather than sinister, and it is sometimes witnessed by a passive narrator, who may serve as a moral and psychological norm for the reader. In the final analysis, the grotesque becomes Poe's way of holding the mirror up to nature, of revealing through the distorting glass of his fiction, what he considered to be the absurd utopias of the nineteenth century American mind--transcendentalism, rationalism, and materialism, in a sense, his major themes.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Harvey Wish, Society and Thought in Early America (New York, 1950), p. 520. Wish's book, which has gone through eight printings, remains one of the standard works on American social and intellectual history.

<sup>2</sup>Vincent Buranelli, Edgar Allan Poe (Princeton, 1961), p. 72. Buranelli's comment is extreme, as well as superficial; it is significant, however, in that it characterizes a still prevailing critical view.

<sup>3</sup>Yvor Winters, Maule's Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism (Binghampton, 1939), p. 114. Winters is one of Poe's most hostile critics. His central thesis is that Poe achieved remarkable harmony between his theory and his work but was exceptionally bad in both.

<sup>4</sup>The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. James A. Harrison, Vol XIV (New York, 1902), 1940196. Hereafter, all excerpts from Poe's essays and letters, as well as Eureka, will be taken from this edition and simply referred to in parentheses, along with volume and page number, as Works. All excerpts from Poe's fiction will come from The Complete Tales of Edgar Allan Poe (New York, 1938), and only page references will be listed in parentheses.

<sup>5</sup>Edwin Honig, "In Defense of Allegory," The Kenyon Review, XX (Winter, 1958), 11.

<sup>6</sup>See "The House of Poe," in The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. Eric Carlson (Ann Arbor, 1966), pp. 255-279; "Edgar Allan Poe" in Major Writers of America, ed. Perry Miller, I (New York, 1962), pp. 369-382; Introduction to Poe, The Laurel Poetry Series (New York, 1959), pp. 7-39.

<sup>7</sup>"The House of Poe," p. 259.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>10</sup>Dewayne Peterson in Poe's Grotesque Humor, unpubl. diss. (Duke, 1962), notes that recent critics have generally avoided distinguishing between grotesque and arabesque. Peterson sees the terms as complementary and almost synonymous, but he makes his own distinctions. He sees the arabesque as "inanimate pictorial detail--extremely convoluted figures, far-fetched forms, and unusual or violent combinations. . . ." He regards the grotesque as ". . . forms which are fantastic in mass, shape, or coloring while retaining some resemblance to the ordinary natural appearance of an animal or a human being. . .", p. 15.

<sup>11</sup>See Wolfgang Kayser's The Grotesque in Art and Literature, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington, 1963), and

Arthur Clayborough's The Grotesque in English Literature (Oxford, 1965). Clayborough's book is the most recent study of the grotesque now available. A good part of it is devoted to a survey of various definitions of the grotesque, and included in it is an evaluation of Kayser's treatment of the subject. The Preface is inadequate, however, in establishing with ample clarity Clayborough's purpose: ". . . to show that a significant relationship can be traced between the various types of grotesque art as a product of the interaction of two contrasting sides of human nature: the practical, rational side, and the sense of the eternal. . . ." Another fault in the work is its use of a burdensome if not questionable terminology coined by the author.

<sup>12</sup>William Van O'Connor, The Grotesque: An American Genre (Carbondale, 1962).

<sup>13</sup>Edward H. Davidson, Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge, 1957), p. 139. In many ways, Davidson's study is still the best book to date on Poe and central to an understanding of his art, thought, and place in American nineteenth century culture.

<sup>14</sup>Peterson, iii.

<sup>15</sup>Kayser, pp. 21-22.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MARRIAGE OF HELEN AND FAUSTUS

Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche  
How statue-like I see thee stand!  
The agate lamp within thy hand,  
Ah! Psyche, from the regions which  
Are Holy land!

The narrative perspective in Poe's "To Helen" is established by the distance, both physical and symbolic, which exists between the admirer and the object of his admiration; and since the figures are presented in a frozen moment, reminiscent of the lovers painted on Keats' Urn, nothing occurs in the poem to alter its elevated vision. In this instant of time Helen remains exalted; but the fiction of Poe is another matter. It examines the union between man and woman after a literal or symbolic marriage has taken place, and it explores the process of spiritual atrophy that sets in as woman, Poe's emblem of the sublime, is metamorphosed into an object of the grotesque. Nevertheless, "To Helen" foreshadows a relationship between man and woman that is central to a group of stories I have referred to as "The Marriage of Helen and Faustus."<sup>1</sup> Marriage in Poe is merely a stage prop, one of the basic conventions in the fiction

which serves the purpose of linking together man and woman, representatives of different realms of being, and the literal and figurative offspring of such a union are structurally and thematically grotesque. Marriage, as I use the word here, refers either to the husband-wife relationship or to any relationship between man and woman in which the ties are of such a binding nature that the fate of one determines the fate of the other.

If the narrator in "To Helen" appears to worship beauty, the Faustian protagonist of the marriage group is obsessed with it and with its philosophical corollary, higher knowledge. His obsession is generated by the gulf which exists between himself and the woman, a gulf which he can never bridge in his mortal condition. He is usually portrayed as a transcendentalist manqué, a quester after the sublime, whose relation with the woman is the first avenue to the transcendental experience; but he is not satisfied with occasional contact with the transcendental. He tries to achieve some form of mystical stasis, which is symbolized by the bond that exists between himself and the woman. Paradoxically, however, the mystical experience for mortal man is evanescent. Furthermore, the protagonist lacks preparation for it--humility and selflessness--and thereby nullifies any possibility of achieving it. George Kelley has observed that in "Poe's system ideal beauty is pure; thus any encroachment upon its representations by the reason,

the moral sense, or the passions is a violation of its proper nature."<sup>2</sup>

The marriage group furnishes a record of such violations, and their consequence is the appearance of the grotesque, the wife's return from the dead. For Poe, as artist and aesthetic theorist, the perversion of beauty and the loss of the ideal would have been considered depressing. For Poe's protagonist, the experience serves as a stunning moral indictment of what is often a ruthless transcendental idealism.

Seven stories comprise the marriage group: "Ligeia," (1838), "Morella" (1835), "Berenice" (1835), "The Oval Portrait" (1842), "The Assignation" (1834), "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), and "Eleonora" (1842). In three of them--"Ligeia," "Morella," and "The Oval Portrait"--marriage is a literal fact; in "Berenice" it is a near fact. Berenice and Agaeus, cousins, are betrothed to each other and await their wedding. These four stories establish the core for the category, while the last three--"The Assignation," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "Eleonora"--serve as variants. In "The Assignation" the binding relationship, or the true marriage, is not between the literal husband and wife, the Marchesa Aphrodite and Mentoni, but between the Marchesa and the mysterious stranger whose deaths occur within the space of a few minutes of each other. In "The

"Fall of the House of Usher" the union between brother and sister, identical twins, constitutes a symbolic marriage both in life and death.<sup>3</sup> In "Eleonora" we are presented with two marriages: the metaphorical union of cousins in a prelapsarian Eden and the actual marriage between the narrator-protagonist and Ermengarde, an inhabitant of the world outside of Eden.

"Ligeia," as the keynote story in the category, establishes woman as the apotheosis of the ideal. The name Ligeia appeared in an earlier work of Poe, "Al Aaraaf," where she is associated with the harmony of music, but in the short story she is the incarnation of much more: of beauty which, in every detail, is unsurpassed; of knowledge, which embraces both the classical languages and philosophy. Ligeia, as woman, is the concrete manifestation of that realm in which beauty is truth and truth beauty, but woman in Poe is short lived, and eventually Ligeia sickens and dies. Her death represents one of the best known conventions in Poe, fundamental to the fiction and the poetry: the death of a beautiful woman. In "Eleonora" and in the poem "Ulalume," for example, woman is destroyed by passion, but generally she succumbs to the malady of lovelessness. For the Faustian husband she serves merely as a source of abstruse speculation rather than as an object of love. In "Ligeia," it is the latter condition which concerns us. As Allen Tate acutely observes "The Poe hero tries in self-love to turn the soul



of the heroine into something like a physical object which he can know in direct cognition and then possess."<sup>4</sup> A variation on this dual obsession both to know and possess is presented in "Al Aaraaf."

In "Al Aaraaf" Poe had already allegorized the possibility of man's transcendence from mere sense substance to partial spirit, but he also dramatized the failure in Angelo, who does not accept the opportunity of elevating himself to a higher realm of being. In addition, Ianthe's descent from Al Aaraaf to earth is represented as a spiritual as well as a geographical descent. Poe demonstrates both man's difficulty in overcoming his earthly nature and the precariousness of a semi-spiritual existence once it has been achieved. The problem is at the heart of the romantic imagination and is well illustrated in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale." Once the narrator is distracted from the nightingale's song, he loses his hold on the realm just beyond the senses, and confronts the poverty of the isolated self, cut off from the source of the sublime. At this parallel point in "Ligeia"--after Ligeia has died--a series of structural and thematic movements occur that establish the world of the grotesque in the story.

After Ligeia's death the husband still remains obsessed with the sublime, but since his wife is no longer available, he transfers his attention from person to place. Place for him, though, is not the Emersonian landscape but

an artificial "landscape" of his own making. He finds temporary relief from the loss of his wife in ". . . the gorgeous and fantastic draperies, in the solemn carvings of Egypt, in the wild cornices and furniture, in the Bedlam of the carpets of tufted gold" (p. 660). The narrator leaves the City on the Rhine, the home of Ligeia, also a symbol of German transcendentalism, and withdraws to an abbey in England, an abbey which he transfers into an Al Aaraaf on earth; but the Al Aaraaf of the poem had been a world distilled of earthly elements, retaining only those qualities of earthly substance closest to the spiritual--flowers, scented odors, clouds. On the other hand, the transcendental experiences of the man are received only through the aesthetic artifices produced by his corrupted transcendental sense. But place does not recreate for him a satisfactory version of the spiritual Ligeia and ". . . in a moment of mental alienation" (p. 660) he marries the fair-haired blue-eyed Lady Rowena of Tremaine, a woman emblematic of fact, the material world. Like Ianthé who has descended from Al Aaraaf to earth, the narrator has been involved in a descent in the metaphorical Great Chain of Being. From Ligeia to Rowena, he has moved from the world of the ideal to the world of material substance.

A countermovement to the narrator's descent is Ligeia's reentry into the world of the living (a grotesque version of the romantic theme of death and rebirth) through

the body of Rowena. An ambiguity appears to center itself on Ligeia's return, however. Ligeia's fierce struggles against death and the quotation of Glanville with reference to the will ("Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of the feeble will.") suggest Ligeia's struggle to overcome death. More significant, however, are the narrator's own remarks on Ligeia. Incapable of finding satisfaction in his marriage with Rowena, and loathing her ". . . with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man" (p. 661) the narrator becomes obsessed with Ligeia and, it would seem, wills her back to life:

In the excitement of my opium dreams (for I was habitually fettered in the shackles of the drug), I would call aloud upon her name, during the silence of the night or among the sheltered recesses of the glens by day, as if, through the wild eagerness, the solemn passion, the consuming ardor of my longing for the departed, I could restore her to the pathways she had abandoned--ah, could it be for ever?--upon the earth. (p. 662)

Slowly but surely, as if in response to her husband's yearning, Ligeia ascends to life. The pictorial symbolism of Ligeia in the death garments of Rowena represents the final disposition of the transcendentalist's ideal--Ligeia becomes what she has most abhorred, the conqueror Worm. Formerly the symbol of perfection she now serves as an object of horror and death, and she herself seems aware of this fact. The narrator declares: "Shrinking from my touch, she let fall from her head, unloosened, the ghastly cerements which had

confined it . . ." (p. 665). Ligeia identifies herself, but surely not for the purpose of her husband's edification. The confrontation is a moral one.

"Morella" and "Berenice" (both appeared in 1835) as earlier versions of "Ligeia" represent preliminary studies of spiritual miscegenation, and in "Morella" the Faustian personality of the husband seems to be in an experimental stage. It appears less developed in him than it does in the husband-narrators of "Ligeia" and "Berenice." In fact, he appears spiritually obtuse. The husband, "Thrown by accident in to her (Morella's) society many years ago," (p. 667) enters the world of a spiritually elevated personality without having at once recognized the uniqueness of her identity and the effect her presence has wrought on his soul. He remarks: ". . . My soul, from our first meeting, burned with fires it had never before known; but the fires were not of Eros, and bitter and tormenting to my spirit was the gradual conviction that I could in no manner define their usual meaning, or regulate their vague intensity" (p. 667). By way of contrast, Ligeia's husband is sufficiently perceptive to recognize his wife's elevated identity:

There is one dear topic on which my memory fails me not. It is the person of Ligeia. In stature she was tall, somewhat slender, and in her latter days, even emaciated. I would in vain attempt to portray the majesty, the quiet ease of her footfall. She came and departed as a shadow. I was never made aware of her entrance into my closed study, save by the dear music of her low sweet voice, as she placed her marble hand upon my shoulder. In beauty of face

no maiden equalled her. It was the radiance of an opium dream--an airy and spirit-lifting vision more wildly divine than the phantasies which hovered about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos. (pp. 654-655)

The similarity of the two husbands, aside from their union with beautiful and learned women, is in their roles as pupils. Both husbands are exposed to the transcendental studies of their wives; but here again Morella's husband demonstrates his shallowness by joining Morella in her academic occupations merely ". . . out of habit and example" (p. 667). The German mystical writers to which Morella introduces him he considers disdainfully ". . . the mere dross of the early German literature" (p. 667).

If the union in "Ligeia" proved destructive to the woman (despite her husband's capacity for transcendental awareness), Morella's husband (lacking such awareness) has had even less right to enter such a union initially. He is totally unprepared for his transcendental contacts through the imaginative and intellectual journey outside of his own realm. When he does encounter them, he experiences terror:

And then--then, when, poring over forbidden pages, I felt a forbidden spirit enkindling within me--would Morella place her cold hand upon my own and rake up from the ashes of a dead philosophy some low, singular words, whose strange meaning burned themselves in upon my memory. And then, hour after hour would I linger by her side, and dwell upon the music of her voice--until, at length, its melody was tainted with terror,--and there fell a shadow upon my soul--and I grew pale, and shuddered inwardly at these too unearthly tones. And thus, joy suddenly faded into horror, and the most beautiful became the most hideous, as Hinnom became Gehenna. (p. 667)

Although the protagonist "never spoke of passion nor thought of love" (p. 669), he has regarded Morella with ". . . a feeling of deep yet most singular affection" (p. 667). Yet once Morella becomes for him an object of terror, his affection vanishes and Morella is cut off from the only source nourishment she has received in her marriage. Again the processes of the grotesque are initiated. Morella begins to sicken and die, and as the changes take place in her person the protagonist's symbolic perspective also changes. No longer do his eyes engage the figure of the elevated woman; the narrator's line of spiritual vision descends: "My soul sickened and became giddy with the giddiness of one who gazes downward into some dreary and unfathomable abyss" (p. 668). Having, in effect, rejected Morella's transcendental realm, the husband rejects Morella in her own person once physical decay sets in. His abhorrence of her becomes so great that he longs even for her death: "Shall I then say that I longed with an earnest and consuming desire for Morella's decease?" (p. 668).

In at least two stories there seems to be a direct relationship between the husband's level of transcendental awareness (i.e., the state of his soul) and the nature and degree of his punishment. At the point of death, and after, Ligeia exists for her husband as a sacred vessel. For all her sufferings before death, they remain on amicable terms and she expresses a love for him which he feels unworthy of.

The real punishment comes not in her loss--although he suffers much--but in her return and in her consequent rejection of him. His wish for her restoration represents not only a second violation of her spiritual identity but, more important, a violation of the boundaries of life and death. Morella, however, becomes a source of torment both before and after her death, and her accusations reveal her husband as a transcendental dilettante:

"I repeat that I am dying. But within me is a pledge of that affection--ah, how little!--which thou didst feel for me, Morella. And when my spirit departs shall the child live--thy child and mine, Morella's. But thy days shall be of sorrow--that sorrow which is the most lasting of impressions, as the cypress is the most enduring of trees. For the hours of thy happiness are over; and joy is not gathered twice in a life, as the roses of Paestum twice in a year. Thou shalt no longer, then, play the Teian with time, but, being ignorant of the myrtle and the vine, thou shalt bear about with thee thy shroud on earth, as do the Moslemin at Mecca." (p. 669)

The husband has played the "teian with time"; lacking in transcendental sensibility, he nevertheless trifles with realms foreign to his nature.<sup>5</sup>

Morella's death is prefaced by the birth of her baby ". . . which breathed not until the mother breathed no more" (p. 669). The daughter grows up to be a replica of the mother in body and mind to the mystification of the "father-husband" who "found food for consuming thought and horror--for a worm that would not die" (p. 670). If Morella's husband appears to be a greater sinner than the husband of

Ligeia, his punishment has also increased proportionately. "Ligeia" reaches its point of moral and dramatic climax when the wife returns to utter her voiceless condemnation of her husband. In "Morella," however, the wife exacts a greater penalty. Morella exists as a continual scourge to the husband's weakness and folly. The man who has violated his wife, and her realm of being, experiences a horror that is cumulative, the unresolved paradox of life-in-death or death-in-life, arising from his uncertainty as to the child's identity. Only after the daughter has died (the father has also named her Morella) is his doubt resolved. On entering the tomb of the first Morella he discovers that she is missing and the reader is led to believe that the daughter has indeed been a reincarnation of the wife. The husband's epistemological problem, coextensive with Poe's use of the grotesque, has already served as the burden of his punishment. When realms are fused, boundaries are destroyed and man loses his orientation and psychological anchorage. The end result is terror.

In his Faustian identity, the husband of "Berenice" stands considerably above his counterparts in "Morella" and "Ligeia." Endowed by nature with analytical faculties and transcendental sensibilities superior to those of the husbands of Ligeia and Morella, Egaeus, the husband of Berenice, comes closest to the original Faustus in his attempts to transcend his mortal condition. Like his counterparts, Egaeus is both



commentator and actor and contributes to the story rhetorically and dramatically. The crucial difference lies in the nature of his commentary. Segments of it come in the form of philosophical discourse and suggest not only his quest for the sublime but also the realization that one pays the price for such an experience:

Misery is manifold. The wretchedness of earth is multiform. Overreaching the wide horizon as the rainbow, its hues are as various as the hues of that arch--as distinct too, yet as intimately blended. Overreaching the wide horizon of the rainbow! How is it that from beauty I have derived a type of unloveliness?--from the covenant of peace, a simile of sorrow? But, as in ethics, evil is a consequence of good, so, in fact, out of joy is sorrow born. Either the memory of past bliss is the anguish of today, or the agonies which are, have their origin in the ecstasies which might have been. (p. 642)

Egeus, addressing himself to the reader, asks what is undoubtedly the most important single question posed by the story, and in an extended sense, by the very category itself: "How is it that from beauty I have derived a type of unloveliness?" (p. 642). Unlike Oedipus, he has not been able to solve the riddle. He merely offers an Emersonian explanation which, in context, suggests the failure of his moral imagination to assert itself with as much force as his transcendental imagination. "But as in ethics," he remarks, "evil is a consequence of good, so in fact, out of joy is sorrow born" (p. 642). Egeus, at the end of the story can only realize the horror of his actions, but his moral sense is dead to the nature of his guilt.

Although Berenice and Egaeus are cousins, and grow up together in his paternal halls, they become associated with different realms of life: ". . . I, ill of health, and buried in gloom--she, agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy; hers the ramble on the hillside--mine the studies of the cloister; I, living within mine own heart, and addicted, body and soul, to the most intense and painful meditation--she carelessly through life . . ." (p. 643). In the case of Berenice and Egaeus, the initial processes of the grotesque, the decay of Berenice, begins not after marriage--Berenice dies before their intended marriage takes place--but at that point in their relationship when Berenice's beauty begins to engage Egaeus's attention: ". . . And even, while I gazed upon her, the spirit of change swept over her, pervading her mind, her habits, and her character, and, in a manner the most subtle and terrible, disturbing even the identity of her purpose! Alas! the destroyer came and went!--and the victim--where is she? I knew her not--or knew her no longer as Berenice!" (p. 643).

A number of important parallels exist between Poe's allegorical figures and certain concepts in the thought of Emerson and Whitman. The dialectic of Self and Other, so prominent in their transcendental literature, is played out as a symbolic drama in Poe's fiction. Berenice seems to be emblematic of Otherness, everything outside the individual soul or consciousness of the narrator. In her infinite

variety Berenice is an emblem of nature. Withdrawn and meditative, Egaeus is the symbol of the autonomous self--contracted, undilated, incapable of conscious empathy with what lies outside. Here the philosophic marriage between Self and Other fails before the literal one takes place. Egaeus declares: "During the brightest days of her unparalleled beauty, most surely I had never loved her. In the strange anomaly of my existence, feelings with me, had never been of the heart, and my passions always were of the mind" (p. 645). Egaeus cannot, like Emerson, annihilate his sense of self and become "a transparent eyeball."<sup>6</sup> He can only regard Berenice as an object of his personal aesthetic satisfaction.

As is the case in "Ligeia" and "Morella" the violation of woman's sanctity brings with it some form of poetic justice, and Poe, in his oblique fashion, has already prepared us for it in Egaeus's speculation: "How is it that from beauty I have derived a type of unloveliness?" If Berenice's disease is distinguished by the ebbing of her life, conversely her cousin is subject to a malady that is characterized by a heightening of life. Egaeus finds himself suffering from a hyperactive transcendental sensibility. "This monomania, if I must so term it," he remarks, "consisted in a morbid irritability of those properties of the mind in metaphysical science termed the attentive" (p. 643). Perception for Egaeus no longer is a source for the sublime,

and he finds himself incapable of controlling even his visual perspective.

To muse for long unwearied hours, with my attention riveted to some frivolous device on the margin or in the typography of a book; to become absorbed, for the better part of a summer's day, in a quaint shadow falling aslant upon the tapestry or upon the floor; to lose myself, for an entire night, in watching the steady flame of a lamp, or the embers of a fire; to dream away whole days over the perfume of a flower; to repeat, monotonously, some common word, until the sound by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to convey any idea whatever to mind; to lose all sense of motion or physical existence, by means of absolute bodily quiescence long and obstinately persevered in . . . (p. 644).

In diagnosing his ailment, Egaeus realizes his obsessions with ". . . objects in their own nature frivolous, must not be confounded in character with that ruminating propensity common to all mankind, and more especially indulged in by persons of ardent imagination" (p. 644). While most men lose themselves in meditations on nature in the Emersonian or Wordsworthian manner, through identification and empathy, Egaeus does not. His ". . . meditations were never pleasurable." The healthy transcendental benefits available to others--the elevation of one's spiritual sights--are not his: "In a word, the powers of mind more particularly exercised were, with me, as I have said before, the attentive, and are, with the day-dreamer, the speculative" (p. 644).

In the decay of Berenice, Egaeus suffers a gradual spiritual loss which he finds intolerable, and in his nostalgia for his cousin's remaining beauty, his attention

focuses on the only portion of her person that remains unsullied--her teeth. Berenice, formerly the incarnation of the sublime, no longer fascinates Egaeus in the wholeness of her physical identity. She has been reduced in his imagination to an anatomical object.

. . . I found that my cousin had departed from the chamber. But from the disordered chamber of my brain, had not, alas! departed, and would not be driven away, the white and ghastly spectrum of the teeth. Not a speck on the surface--not a shade on their enamel--not an indenture in their edges--but what that brief period of her smile had sufficed to brand on my memory. I saw them now even more unequivocally than I beheld them then. The teeth!--the teeth!--they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly and palpably before me; long, narrow, and excessively white, and visibly and palpably before me. . . . (p. 646)

Emerson observed that "A fact is the end or last issue of spirit."<sup>7</sup> The imagination of Egaeus is no longer capable of discriminating between fact, i.e., substance, and spirit. Even before Berenice had succumbed to her disease, Egaeus extracts her teeth, unconscious of his own actions, and places them in a box as mementos of the sublime. For the first time and only time in the fiction Egaeus makes contact with Otherness. The self dilates in an action that brings it union not with the sublime Berenice, but with the objects whose symbolic referent is animal rather than spirit, objects of the grotesque.

The imprint of the teeth on Egaeus's imagination represents a grotesque version of Wordsworth's "spots of time." Like Wordsworth in "The Prelude" or "Tintern Abbey,"

Egeus is arrested by a vivid sensory experience rooted in an actual experience which had taken place some time in the past, i.e., his earlier encounter with Berenice. In Wordsworth's poems, the "spots of time" have a renovating virtue on the imagination; they are the gift of nature to the mind. For the transcendentalist manqué, the experience functions as a form of punishment. The imagination for Egeus becomes a scourge and minister of revenge.

Although falling within the core of the marriage group, "The Oval Portrait" represents a departure in technique from the stories discussed so far. With respect to the use of a central intelligence it is closely related to "The Assignment" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." Instead of using the protagonist as both actor and commentator, Poe supplies a figure who stands between the reader and the protagonist. "Poe," observes James Gargano, "intends his readers to keep their powers of analysis and judgment ever alert; he does not require or desire complete surrender to the experience of the sensations being felt by the character."<sup>8</sup> In "Ligeia," "Morella," and "Berenice," the encounter with the grotesque comes to the protagonist and the reader. The horror is experienced by both, but in addition to the horror, the reader experiences--or should experience--its moral significance. In these stories the reader--rather than a character in them--is the register of moral sensibility. Poe's method is to be found in satire (In a sense

the marriage group furnishes satire without humor.). In the "Oval Portrait," however, the use of a central intelligence does have the advantage of centering the reader's moral vision more sharply. Since he is more or less an innocent who stumbles into the world of the grotesque, his sensibilities serve as a moral norm.

In its subject "The Oval Portrait" is almost one with "Ligeia," "Morella," and "Berenice": a beautiful woman wastes away in a marriage in which she merely serves as an object of the husband's delight. A young and beautiful girl marries an artist and quickly discovers that Art is her rival. The husband appears more interested in capturing the likeness of the wife on canvas than in loving the palpable woman. Like all his counterparts, the artist is interested in the woman only as essence or spirit. Looking at the likeness of his wife on canvas, he declares: "'This is indeed life itself!" (p. 292). In a sudden revelation about the nature of his art, the husband discovers that he has arrested life and made of it a work of art. It is the narrator as central intelligence, however, who experiences the moral impact of what has occurred: "At length, satisfied with the true secret of its effect, I fell back within the bed. I found the spell of the picture in an absolute life-likeness of expression, which, at first, startling, finally, confounded, subdued, and appalled me" (p. 291). In his reactions the narrator reveals a mixture of awe and shock; awe in his

admiration of the work and shock from his sense of incongruity; he has become aware that the realm of art has somehow violated the sphere of human life by transforming a corporeal substance into an incorporeal one. The narrator is therefore "confounded," "subdued," and "appalled," and reflects his sense of disorientation. Because of the violations of realms, a sense of the grotesque registers itself on the narrator's consciousness.

"The Assignation" differs from the core stories of the category not only in its use of the marriage convention but also in two other important but closely related respects: first, in its theme, and second, in the presentation of the theme through the use of the grotesque. In "Ligeia," "Morella," "Berenice," and "The Oval Portrait," the controlling theme is that of life-in-death and death-in-life, and it is given formal expression in the visual grotesque (i.e., the return of Ligeia to life in the death garments of Rowena). In "The Assignation" the controlling theme centers on love-in-death, but it is not presented with the visual or dramatic intensity of the stories already dealt with. The effects of the grotesque are achieved through coincidental deaths, only one of which is visualized by the narrator.

Here the legal union of husband and wife does not constitute marriage in the most binding and permanent sense. The Marchesa Aphrodite, although married to Mentoni, has a more compelling union with the nameless stranger who



mysteriously appears and rescues her child from the canal. Her husband is portrayed as a "satyr-like" figure almost completely devoid of transcendental sensibility. Even Mentoni's aesthetic pursuits suggest a fin de siècle indifference almost wholly atypical to the Faustian personality of the marriage group: "He was occasionally occupied in thrumming a guitar and seemed ennuyé to the very death . . ." (p. 294). The misalliance between the literal husband and wife is even more marked here than it is elsewhere in the category. On the other hand, the mystical union existing between Aphrodite and the stranger is not presented as a positive alternative. At first the narrator appears to sympathize with the stranger, who is a man of unique sensibility:

There are surely other worlds than this--other thoughts than the thoughts of the multitude--other speculations than the speculations of the sophist. Who then shall call thy conduct into question? who blame thee for thy visionary hours, or denounce these occupations as a wasting away of life, which were but the over-flowings of thine everlasting energies?" (p. 293)

His moral point of view, however, is crystallized in the horror which he experiences at the death of the stranger.

At the invitation of the stranger, the narrator makes a visit to the host's luxurious quarters and becomes the only human being, with the exception of the valet, to witness their splendor. As in "Ligeia" a pattern of movement is established which takes us from the sublime located in woman to the sublime ostensibly located in place. The final movement, however, brings the stranger back to the

woman, but it is a movement that takes him into the realm of death. At the precise moment that the servant of Aphrodite enters the stranger's room and announces her death--death by poison--the narrator turns to his host, who is stretched out on the ottoman with a "cracked and blackened" goblet in his hand, and realizes that he too is dead from poison. The intensity of the relationship between the Marchesa and the stranger has made verbal communication between them unnecessary: just before the servant had entered the narrator remarks that his host ". . . seemed to be listening in the deepest attention, as if either in momentary expectation of a visitor, or to sounds which must have had existence in his imagination alone" (p. 299). Through some form of telepathic communion, the Marchesa and the stranger are able to transcend the bounds of time and space.

For the first time Poe presents a man and a woman who are truly elective affinities of each other; both have evidently been capable of a mystical dilation and empathy unknown in the relationships between man and woman in the core group thus far. On the other hand, Poe does not hold up the union as a model free from taint. The relationship of the Marchesa and the stranger is an illicit one to begin with. Its illicit nature, however, exists on a metaphysical level: in its having transcended the normal categories of experience. The figure of the corpse, which the narrator regards with amazement, serves as a formal expression of the

grotesque, and the romantic optimism suggested by the quotation appended to the tale: "Stay for me there! I will not fail/To meet thee in the hollow vale." seems, in context, ironic rather than transcendental.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is one of those key works in the canon of an author that sums up or offers a last word on themes that he has long been preoccupied with. Written in 1839, it comes later than all the other stories in the marriage group with the exception of "The Oval Portrait" (1842) and "Eleonora" (1842). Consequently, man and woman as symbolic referents, along with structural and thematic patterns of the grotesque, were already at Poe's disposal.

Like its counterparts in the category, "The Fall of the House of Usher" concerns itself with the relationship between man and woman, the decline and death of the woman, and the state of mind of the man before and after her death; but the most important structural and thematic similarity of the story to the others is the return of Madeline from the tomb in a mortal (and moral) confrontation with Roderick. The story, however, furnishes striking variations on the pattern Poe had at his command. To begin with, the Lady Madeline does not appear to be the agency of the sublime for her brother Roderick; nor is her person for him a source of abstruse speculation and study. Unfortunately the story, by and large, tends to be examined in isolation, and critics

generally have tended to ignore the similarities as well as the differences between it and other stories within the marriage group. In speculating on its uniqueness among these stories, one ought to consider the question of time as it pertains to his entrance into the story. The reader enters the world of the Ushers in medias res, at a point in the relationship of brother and sister that is much later than any in the marriage group, with the exception of "Berenice." We therefore never see Madeline in the glory of her youth and beauty; instead we encounter her in the throes of her illness and decay.

The narrator remarks that the gloom of Roderick Usher was caused by the "approaching dissolution--of a tenderly beloved sister, his sole companion for long years, his last and only relative on earth" (p. 236). The allegorical cues supplied by the symbolic role of the Poe woman, and her relation to the thematic pattern of the other stories, must be kept in mind for a full understanding of "The Fall of the House of Usher." Such a knowledge is necessary, even though it suggests the story by itself may not be completely coherent on the thematic level present in the rest of the marriage group. Traditionally, women have always been exalted as the symbol of beauty or spirit, and throughout the marriage group, the wife has functioned consistently as a synthesis of these two qualities. Davidson, in his treatment of the story assigns Madeline another

symbolic identity, curiously opposite to that which Poe had subscribed to elsewhere in his fiction and poetry. In speaking of the triparte division of the self--mind, body, and soul--Davidson suggests that "Madeline is the sensual or physical side of the psyche," and he refers to Roderick as "the mind or intellectual aspect of total being."<sup>9</sup> As evidence of Roderick's symbolic identity, Davidson alludes to the physical appearance of the brother whose features suggest a male Ligeia.

Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye, large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breath of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy. . . . (p. 234)

Davidson, however, ignores one very important fact; the physical appearance of Madeline, who is Roderick's identical twin, and therefore possessed of those very features which he finds the basis for Roderick's symbolic identity. As a woman of the same physical stamp as Roderick it is she who is to be associated with soul, in Poe a fragile essence easily destroyed. Although Roderick has much to say of beauty in his comments on art and music, he has nothing to say of Madeline on the theme of supernal beauty because she is the husk of her former self. It is Roderick who is to be thought of as the physical side of the psyche, the material man yearning continually for the spiritual side of

himself. The story strongly suggests that, like his male counterparts, he has inadvertently lived at the expense of the woman, the weaker and the fragile member of the relationship. The curious maladies which brother and sister both suffer suggest a parasitical relationship in which the parasite suffers as much as the host. Madeline's mysterious symptoms parallel those of Ligeia, Berenice, and Morella: "A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character were the usual diagnosis." Roderick, like Egaeus, in "Berenice," experiences an increase in the sharpness of his senses, as though he had absorbed in some manner, Madeline's life energies, which in turn generates a heightening of his own faculties. His acuteness of the senses, however, is "morbid" and affords him no sense of elevation: ". . . The most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of a certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light . . . (p. 235).

As a corrupted Faust figure, Roderick appears to the narrator as a cross between Mentoni and the stranger of "The Assignation": "Usher arose from the sofa on which he had been lying and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I first thought, of an overdone cordiality--of the constrained effort of the ennuyé man of the world" (p. 234). He too has the earmarks of the pleasure seeker,

but at the time of the narrator's encounter with him place rather than woman becomes the source of his gratification. Madeline's transformation into an object of the grotesque leaves him no visual source outside of his furnishings and the solipsistic visions of his own paintings as a basis for transcendence; and the narrator's own observations of the house furnish testimony to what is spiritually reductive rather than transcendental: "The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow" (p. 234).

Even the natural surroundings around the Usher house fail to provide the narrator with a sense of elevation that such surroundings usually afford:

I know not how it was--but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually received the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me--upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain--upon the bleak walls--upon the vacant eye-like windows--upon a few rank sedges--and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees--with an utter depression of soul. . . . (p. 231)

The fundamental movement of the story is hinted at by the title. "The Fall of the House of Usher" involves both a literal and symbolic descent, to be perceived by the reader as a form of punishment resulting from Usher's

attempts, and those of his family before him, to live entirely within an imaginative realm: "His reserve had always been excessive and habitual. I was aware, however, that his very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art" (p. 232). Thus both Roderick and Madeline sink into an abyss. The perspective for the downward movement is established at the beginning of the story as the narrator brings his horse ". . . to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn." An imminent fall is suggested as the narrator comments on the perceptible fissure which extends from the roof of the building till it loses itself in the tarn. Roderick's cadaverous complexion and the ghastly pallor of his skin indicate a process of physical breakdown. Madeline's literal descent into the burial vault prefigures Roderick's own fall as Madeline clings to him in her death throes upon reemerging from her burial vault. (Once again we have a grotesque version of rebirth for the purpose of moral confrontation.) And, finally, the actual collapse of the house into the tarn brings about the complete destruction of the Usher family.

As in all other instances the transcendental impulse initiates a counter movement; in this case it is death and submergence. The disappearance of the house into the tarn becomes for the reader a purging of the grotesque from his



consciousness, a purification rite which permits him both an emotional and moral catharsis.

"Eleanora," the last story in the category is, in its own small way, analogous to Shakespeare's The Tempest or James' The Golden Bowl as a work that transfigures evil into good and produces a sense of reconciliation. It is essentially different from all other stories in the marriage group in its unique treatment of Poe's central subject: man's relation to woman. Here, the man no longer makes use of the woman as a mediator between the world of substance and the world of the ideal, and her death does not come about because of her loveless condition. Instead, she is destroyed by the experience of passion. For the first time in stories of this group the processes of the grotesque are not generated for punitive purposes, even though Eleonora dies and the Edenic valley withers away.

Eleonora and her cousin live in a world that is a partially elevated realm, the Valley of the Many Colored Grass. Their union is one of perfect harmony until Eros enters. For a brief period the lovers experience a heightening of life, and the valley itself takes on an unparalleled intensity and brilliance; but the passions soon begin to waste away the woman and eventually the valley. Before Eleonora dies, however, the cousin vows not to bind himself ". . . in marriage to any daughter of Earth . . . (p. 651) and invokes a curse upon himself should he prove untrue.

Once the valley has lost its Edenic appearance, however, the cousin migrates to the city and, contrary to his vow, marries a woman of the Earth, Ermengarde. At this point a movement usually associated with the grotesque takes place. Eleonora returns as a spirit. However, she, unlike her counterparts, exerts a benign influence on her cousin, absolving him of his oath and its consequences: "'Sleep in peace! for the Spirit of Love reigneth and ruleth, and, in taking to thy passionate heart her who is Ermengarde, thou art absolved, for reasons which shall be made known to thee in Heaven, of thy vows unto Eleonora.'" (p. 653). Poe brings to the story what is nearly a Christian resolution in his record of the grotesque.

Although the cousin has not been guilty of violating the woman because of his obsession with the transcendental, his characterization, nevertheless, is strikingly similar to every other Faustian personality in the marriage group. He too is presented, initially at least, as a visionary who is fascinated with the eternal: "They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night. In their gray visions they obtain glimpses of eternity, and thrill, in waking, to find that they have been upon the verge of the great secret" (p. 649). Why Poe altered the character of the cousin later on in the story is a matter that is academic. That he did, however, is evidenced in the cousin's relationship with Eleonora and his relationship with Ermengarde: in both cases, he shows

himself capable of selfless love; thus, the story serves as a thematic opposite to the rest of the marriage group.

Interesting in themselves, these stories have a relevance beyond their individual interpretation. All of them present variations on an allegorical scheme tangential to Poe's thought. Fundamental to the scheme is the attempt of man to remove himself from reality and remain ensconced in a perpetual transcendental state. That the dream breaks down and becomes nightmare represents not merely gothic extravaganza. More important, the stories are an expression of Poe's moral realism (a term rarely, if ever, used in connection with his work). Poe does not allow man to escape so easily from the material world without paying a severe penalty. That man should desire escape in the first place reflects a philosophic crisis of the nineteenth century mind. At this point, by way of conclusion, we are led to other works of Poe which have an interest for us from the philosophic and social rather than the mythopoic point of view.

In his role as poet Poe crystallized in "Sonnet--To Science" (1829) the problem faced by the transcendental artist concerning the separation of body and soul, matter and spirit. (Emerson's "Nature" seven years later was a philosophic attempt to reconcile the cleavage.) In the "Sonnet--To Science" the narrator declares that the peering

eyes of science, i.e., the rationalist imagination, has intruded itself upon his world and has driven away "The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree . . ." In his poem "Tables Turned" (1798) Wordsworth had made the same observation about matter and spirit, but had added a moral exhortation:

Our meddling intellect  
Mis-shapes the beautiful forms of  
things:--  
We murder to dissect.  
Enough of science and of art;  
Close up those barren leaves.  
Come forth and bring you a heart  
That watches and receives.

Concerning this matter-spirit dialectic, the major irony of the marriage group is that Faustian man has both the transcendental sense and the scientific bent. Even though he cuts himself off from the world, he has not been able to rid himself of a mind conditioned by rationalism and scientific inquiry. Consequently, his fate is to analyze the ideal to death (e.g., Ligeia) or misconstrue its nature altogether (e.g., Morella). The Poe transcendentalist is incapable of watching and receiving, much less giving.

In the "Colloquy of Monos and Una" Poe moved away from a fictional mode to a thematic mode.<sup>10</sup> He used a dialogue in order to offer a direct commentary on man and society. Refined to spirit forms from an earthly existence, Monos and Una might well be considered a version of Helen and Faust after death. Only after both have achieved a

cosmic perspective is there union and communication between them, and now it is the man who seems to possess the higher wisdom. In one of the few passages in Poe of explicit social criticism, Monos castigates the so-called social and scientific progress of the nineteenth century:

Man, because he could not but acknowledge the majesty of Nature, fell into childish exultation at his acquired and still increasing dominion over her elements. Even while he stalked a God in his own fancy, an infantine imbecility came over him. As might be supposed from the origin of his disorder, he grew infected with system, and with abstraction. He enwrapped himself in generalities. Among other odd ideas, that of universal equality gained ground; and in the face of analogy and of God--in despite of the loud warning voice of the laws of gradation so visibly pervading all things in Earth and Heaven--wild attempts at an omniprevalent Democracy were made . . . Meantime huge smoking cities arose, innumerable. The fair face of Nature was deformed as with the ravages of some loathsome disease. And methinks, sweet Una, even our slumbering sense of the forced and the far-fetched might have arrested us here. But now it appears that we had worked out our own destruction in the perversion of our taste, or rather in the blind neglect of its culture in the schools. For, in truth, it was at this crisis that taste alone--that faculty which, holding a middle position between the pure intellect and the moral sense, could never safely have been disregarded--it was now that taste alone could have led us gently back to Beauty, to Nature, and to Life. (pp. 445-46)

The marriage group presents the three faculties of man--intellect, taste, and the moral sense--in a state of disruption. Man's intellect exists at the expense of taste, and his quest for transcendental knowledge is not controlled by that middle faculty which would have led the quester back to Beauty, Nature, and Life. The moral sense, as we have

seen, has been almost completely inoperative in the Faust figure. Monos observes elsewhere that the soul of man exists in an infantile condition. Man's perspective of the ideal is therefore the perspective of a child who looks up toward something higher than himself, and like the child he sees the object above him from a distorted point of view. Monos indicates that man can have knowledge of the universe only after he has died out of his mortal condition. Using Monos as an apparent commentator for his own point of view, Poe seems to suggest that contact and communion with the universe cannot be achieved until man has become spiritually purified--either in this life or in the next.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Hereafter, for the sake of convenience, I will refer to the stories as the marriage group.

<sup>2</sup>George Kelley, "Poe's Theory of Beauty," American Literature, XXVII (January, 1956), 531.

<sup>3</sup>Davidson observes that Madeline's name ". . . is derived from Saint Mary Magdala, which means 'tower'; therefore she is the lady of the house," p. 197.

<sup>4</sup>Allen Tate, Collected Essays (Denver, 1959), p. 435.

<sup>5</sup>Anacreon, A Greek poet whose verse is characterized as light, graceful, and convivial was also referred to as the Teian Muse. Morella's reference to her husband is bitterly ironic.

<sup>6</sup>The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York, 1940), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>8</sup>James Gargano, "The Question of Poe's Narrators," in The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe, p. 310.

<sup>9</sup>Davidson, in a footnote, suggests a possible source for Poe's symbolism, an article by Horace Binney Wallace in Burton's Gentleman's Magazine, V, (August, 1839), 105.

<sup>10</sup>Northrop Frye in The Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), p. 53, distinguishes between literature which exists primarily for the fable (i.e., the fictional mode) and that which is concerned almost exclusively with the presentation of a theme (i.e., the thematic mode).



## CHAPTER III

### PREMATURE BURIALS

A Pit--but Heaven over it--  
And Heaven beside, and Heaven abroad;  
And yet a Pit--  
With Heaven over it.

To stir would be to slip--  
To look would be to drop--  
To dream--to sap the Prop  
That holds my chances up.  
Ah Pit! With Heaven over it!<sup>1</sup>

In the stories of the marriage group Poe often presents death and annihilation through the use of metaphor and structural design, as a form of spiritual descent. In "Morella" the husband is sickened by the condition of his dying wife and becomes ". . . giddy with the giddyness of one who gazes downward into some dreary and unfathomable abyss." In "The Fall of the House of Usher" a literal descent, a structural element within the story, brings Madeline and Roderick, along with their ancestral home, to the bottom of the black tarn. In both instances the image carries the idea; the descent into the abyss, a literal as well as thematic condition, expresses what is the greatest of all horrors in Poe's fiction--the fear of personal annihilation, the total loss of consciousness. As Poe uses it

in the marriage group, the downward movement is the basis for the grotesque in this category and part of his moral and allegorical drama. In stories whose central theme concerns crime and punishment, descent becomes an instrument of the only kind of justice available in Poe's gothic universe--poetic justice. Although the victim of these stories is destroyed, the guilty, the amoralist husband, receives his punishment by witnessing a descent into the abyss. Through unconscious empathy with the woman, if not in actual fact, he himself experiences the horror of the fall.

In the fiction that falls under the heading of "Premature Burials" a radical shift in presentation takes place. Poe appears to furnish a study of punishment without crime; or if some form of crime has occurred, its character appears to be so vague that it extends beyond the ability of the reader, or even the protagonist himself, to comprehend its nature. In keeping with the new dramatic emphasis, portraying the man as victim, Poe places a new importance on structure. Here the grotesque always resides in the setting; the agonist becomes involved in an unwilling descent into an abyss where he is threatened by an imminent death and, in nearly all instances, he is completely powerless of acting successfully in his own behalf. Similar to Milton's conception of Hell, Poe's cavern is the lowest point within the physical universe, and the figure who penetrates this realm comes armed only with his rational faculties. Poe's

protagonists, like other literary voyagers into an abyss-- Dante, Marlow, or Prufrock--function as geographers of their special realms, and their encounter with the grotesque is verbally charted for the reader who, by implication, is also a candidate for such a voyage. (Through the examination of the stories as a group, the reader may detect that Poe is holding the mirror up to nature in order to portray men who have departed from the norms of reason and imagination.) Unlike Dante or Milton's Hell, however, the Poe protagonist does not experience the orthodox terrors of the damned, nor is the Poe version of Hell reserved for collective mankind. Traditionally, Hell is a communal enterprise, and its inhabitants know why they are tenants. In Poe's geographical setting, man is cut off from community; he suffers in isolation. For him the descent into the abyss is the work of what appears to be a capricious and incomprehensible universe. As in Paradise Lost, the place inhabited by a creature in Poe's universe gives us a key to his moral status.<sup>2</sup> The Poe protagonist never suspects that his suffering may be the result of a violation of some universal law. From his point of view suffering is always gratuitous. In the case of the reader, the moral dimension of the fiction will remain, for the most part, an elusive figure in the carpet, unless he has a purview of the carpet itself.

Horror is the dominant note that Poe strikes in his stories. Even though he makes use of the traditional

gothic paraphernalia--pits, dungeons, watery caverns--to evoke the horror, the paraphernalia are merely props by which he demonstrates a grasp of an obsessive existential problem, one which also obsessed Emily Dickinson, the crisis of imminent annihilation. Although the word existential is an importation here, it seems to fit the human predicaments dramatized by both Poe and Dickinson. "A Pit--but Heaven over it--" (only two stanzas of the poem are appended to the chapter) testifies to a sensibility similar to Poe's. Both writers concern themselves with descent into an abyss, but Poe goes farther than Dickinson. Beginning where Dickinson stops, he explores the geography of the abyss and its physical and metaphysical terrors. The narrator's early remarks in "The Premature Burial" might well be considered an amplification of Dickinson's dread of the pit:

To be buried while alive is, beyond question, the most terrific of these extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality. That it has frequently, very frequently, so fallen will scarcely be denied by those who think. The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins. . . ? (p. 258)

For Poe, however, the pit is more than a terrifying speculation. It is the arena for a series of recurring dramas, and a key symbol in his surrealistic art.<sup>3</sup>

Although the motif of the descent into a cavern is used in a large number of Poe stories there are only five

in the canon where it is the basis of the fictional design: "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), "MS Found in a Bottle" (1833), "A Descent into the Maelstrom" (1841), and the story that lends its name to the category, "The Premature Burial" (1844). The nature of the descent and the form of the burial may vary from story to story; but there is one constant--the protagonist's encounter with a grotesque world, a geography alien to his understanding and destructive of his life. In "The Pit and the Pendulum" the narrator-agonist is carried to the bottom of a dungeon by tall, shadowy figures who seem to function as pall bearers for the still living man. The "Cask of Amontillado" also makes use of the dungeon as an infernal world. The agonist of the story is walled up within the dungeon by the narrator who returns to the surface complete in his revenge. (Here, Poe provides the only instance in which a human agency is responsible for the premature burial of another. The antagonists in "The Pit and the Pendulum" are, for all intents and purposes, non-human; the dungeon itself is characterized as a man-eating creature.) In "MS Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom" we encounter a slightly different kind of premature burial; both stories make use of a whirlpool as grotesque setting: in the former, the agonist is thrown upon a gigantic wave which finally carries him to the bottom of the whirlpool; in the latter the whirlpool is also the geographical center

for crisis, but in this instance the agonist survives the ordeal. "The Premature Burial," although not the latest story in the category, holds the same thematic position in this group that "Eleonora" holds in the marriage group. It recapitulates the motifs and themes that Poe had used in the three earlier stories, but it provides a positive resolution through which they are exorcised from his immediate literary concerns. In this instance, the narrator dreams that he has been buried alive, and upon awaking he renounces forever his charnel house interests.

"The Pit and the Pendulum" might be considered a thematic bridge between the stories of the marriage group and those of its own category. While recounting the ordeal of the trial that eventually results in his dungeon experience, the agonist interrupts the progress of his narrative in order to digress ecstatically on the transcendental benefits of swooning:

He who has never swooned, is not he who finds  
strange palaces and wildly familiar faces in coals  
that glow; is not he who beholds floating in mid-air  
the sad visions that the many may not view; is not he  
who ponders over the perfume of some novel flower;  
is not he whose brain grows bewildered with the mean-  
ing of some musical cadence which has never before  
arrested his attention. (p. 247)

Like his Faustian counterparts the speaker has experienced a form of heightened consciousness, but he goes beyond them in arguing for consciousness after death: "I had swooned; but still will not say that all consciousness was lost. In the

deepest slumber--no! In delirium--no! In a swoon--no! In death--no! even in the grave all is not lost. Else there is no immortality for man" (247). The tension between spiritual ascent and descent that characterizes the stories of the marriage group is formally established in "The Pit and the Pendulum" through the narrator's references to the transcendental (i.e., the swoon) and his actual geographical location in the dungeon. At this point the story becomes a documentary on the terrors of his malevolent prison. Just as marriage in Chapter II is a convention for uniting the representatives of alien realms, the black-robed judges in this story also serve the purposes of convention; they are merely the instruments whereby the narrator is transported to his subterranean world. The reader never considers them ministers of revenge. They may exist behind the scenes manipulating the infernal environment, but they are relatively unimportant as dramatis personae. The dramatic and thematic focus of the story is entirely on the agonist's environment, the elusive universe whose boundaries the agonist tries to chart. The only real antagonist is the dungeon itself. The dungeon is presented to the reader anthropomorphosed; like the house of the Ushers, it functions as though it were a sentient organism, a predator.

To know the dungeon and to overcome its mortal terrors represent the supreme ordeal of the narrator's humanity, and as an explorer of the grotesque, he navigates

blindly in the darkness of his prison actively seeking knowledge of its boundaries. His first exploration leads to a major discovery--the pit. When the narrator accidentally trips on his robes, he falls to the ground at its edge and confronts the most unpalatable form of death in Poe--descent into an abyss. His encounter with the pit serves as an intensification of the experience which he has already undergone, but it holds infinitely more dread for him than the dungeon itself because of its symbolic (i.e., metaphysical) significance. "To the victims of its tyranny," the narrator remarks, "there was the choice of death with its direct physical agencies, or death with its most hideous moral horrors. I had been reserved for the latter." (p. 250). The key word here is moral. Falling into the pit involves for the narrator more than the question of sudden death: it mirrors for him what he fears to be the true human condition after death--total physical and spiritual extinction. For the sufferer in "The Pit and the Pendulum" the possibility of complete spiritual extinction after death is a source of unrelieved anguish. Poe presents the matter in another light in the marriage group. The husband appears to be a man who cannot make contact with spiritual essences in the abstract. As a kind of empiricist he sees them existing only in woman, and when the woman dies the ideal appears to die with her. When she is resurrected from the dead, as in "Ligeia" and "Morella," the physical woman, and what she has stood for,



are both rendered grotesque. The narrator's speculation at the beginning of "The Pit and the Pendulum" is therefore a reflection of his moral horror at the thought that immortality does not exist, that the spiritual part of man dies with him.

Throughout the course of the story the narrator's resourcefulness is thwarted by a universe which continually outwits him. After having discovered the pit, the narrator falls asleep and is securely bound by unknown hands during his slumber. Upon awaking, he discovers directly over him a razor sharp pendulum gradually descending. Impending death serves as the impetus to insight and self reliance. By rubbing the bandage that binds him with left over food, the protagonist attracts the rats, and they swarm across his body and chew the bandage to pieces thus freeing him. The man and the rats appear wedded to each other through their mutual collaboration, and Poe once again effects another fusion of realms. ". . . They pressed--they swarmed upon me in ever accumulating heaps. They writhed upon my throat; their cold lips sought my own; I was half stifled by their thronging pressure; disgust, for which the world has no name, swelled my bosom, and chilled with a heavy clamminess, my heart . . . (p. 255). The scene is perhaps the starkest presentation of the grotesque in the story thus far, but it is merely one motif within the large design of the grotesque; the design itself is fully realized only at the end of the story.

The grim game of life and death continues, however, until the narrator finally realizes that he is indeed destined for the horrors of the pit. After having freed himself from the bandage, he becomes aware of the odor of heated metal, but it is not death by fire which his torturers are to impose upon him as the final horror. "Fool!", the narrator cries, "might I not have known that into the pit it was the object of the burning iron to urge me?" (p. 257). Once again the pit becomes the "King of Terrors" as the shape of the narrator's infernal geography begins to change:

. . . And now, flatter and flatter grew the lozenge, with a rapidity that left me no time for contemplation. Its centre, and of course its greatest width, came just over the yawning gulf. I shrank back--but the closing walls pressed me resistlessly onward. At length for my seared and writhing body there was no longer an inch of foothold on the firm floor of the prison. I struggled no more, but the agony of my soul found vent in one loud, long, and final scream of despair. I felt that I tottered on the brink. . . . (p. 257)

At this point Poe renders fully the portrait of the dungeon as grotesque. Once the inanimate walls become animated and begin to close in on the narrator, as the last in a series of symbolic suggestions, the image of the dungeon as predatory beast is complete. Walls, pendulum, and pit serve as the equivalents of jaws, teeth, and gullet.

In "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe declared that the most important principle upon which any given work of art should be built is effect. The effect that Poe so

successfully achieves in "The Pit and the Pendulum" is terror. The story ends abruptly, at the point at which the agonist's terror is at its highest pitch. In the same essay Poe also speaks of the necessity for including in the work of art ". . . some undercurrent, however, indefinite, of meaning" (Works, XIV, 194). Both conditions of Poe's art must be considered in an examination of his fiction. The final question posed by "The Pit and the Pendulum" concerns just this undercurrent of meaning or, perhaps, the multiplicity of meanings which resonate throughout the story. Amid the vagueness of plot, two matters stand out clearly: that the protagonist has been imprisoned by the Inquisition for some form of rebellion, and that he experiences punishments of nightmare proportion. The crime, however, is completely dissociated from the dramatic focus of the story; but even though the narrator exists within our emotional frame of reference as victim, his existence within the dungeon is predicated on the fact that he is technically a criminal: "My cognizance of the pit," he remarks, "had been known to the Inquisitorial agents--the pit whose horrors had been destined for so bold a recusant as myself--the pit, typical of hell and regarded by rumor as the Ultima Thule of all their punishments" (p. 252).

What the narrator's actual rebellion consists of is never made clear. Poe, however, does furnish a subtle suggestion in the narrator's earlier remarks on swooning. Given

Poe's point of view toward the visionary husband in the marriage group, we become aware that the flaw in the narrator seems to be his predisposition to imaginative self-reliance in excess. Allegorically, the husband in the marriage group is on trial (Poe himself seems to be judge and jury) for his abuse of the imagination, as well as his abuse of woman. Although no direct connection is made between the narrator's recusance and the references to his visionary predisposition, Poe's allusiveness is significant. Traditionally, as well as in Poe's version of the figure, Faust is a rebel from the moral law; he is oblivious to authority beyond the dictates of his own senses. Here, and in the marriage group, Poe's undercurrent of meaning seems to have definite references. Through verbal associations Poe connects the narrator in "The Pit and the Pendulum" to the Faustian husband, but through the action represented in the plot, the narrator appears to be portrayed as victim. He is the human paradox--the embodiment of both guilt and innocence. Our double perspective is even reinforced by the nearly symmetrical movements of the story--descent, and implied countermovement, ascent. The rescue of the narrator from the pit comes about as General Lasalle arrives upon the scene pulling the narrator from its jaws just as he is about to fall in, releasing him from the terrors of the grotesque.

In a number of ways "The Cask of Amontillado" presents itself as a variant of "The Pit and the Pendulum."

Here the roles of predator and prey are reversed; the man who was formerly victim turns into avenger; "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge" (p. 274). Montresor, the man originally the insulted and the injured, takes on the function of judge and jailor, but the new victim, unlike his counterpart in "The Pit and the Pendulum," evokes little sympathy in the reader. His characterization is too much like that of Mentoni's in "The Assignment." Fortunato is perhaps Poe's version of Faust utterly debased, a parody of the type. In this story Faust seems to be transformed into a confidence man and an imposter. For Poe Fortunato is the national stereotype: "For the most part their enthusiasm [enthusiasm of the Italians] is adopted to suit the time and opportunity--to practice imposture upon British and American millionaires. In painting and gemmery Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack . . ." (p. 274). The identity of Fortunato is summed up in his dress: "The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells" (p. 274). Montresor entertains in his vaults a man who is characterized as a fool, a buffoon. In "The Assignment," Mentoni, Fortunato's counterpart, is at least associated with music. If not a man of vision, Mentoni cultivates moods. Fortunato is merely a gifted connoisseur of wine, but for him wine is a source of purely physical pleasure, rather than a liberating

influence on his imagination. He does not stimulate transcendental visions through wine; on the contrary, he derives from it unpleasant side effects: ". . . two filmy orbs that distilled the rheum of intoxication" (p. 275). Even while chained to the rock Fortunato, the bibber, is so preoccupied with the Amontillado that he fails to realize the seriousness of his predicament and the true nature of Montresor.

The revenge of Montresor, rather than the terror of Fortunato, generates the drama, in fact, the very manner in which descent takes place. The movement down is as stylized as a ballet, and Fortunato experiences the descent as social activity rather than recognizing it as a source of physical and moral terror. As they go down, Montresor and Fortunato drink, exchange toasts, talk about coats of arms. The reader experiences the descent as unhurried and leisurely. On the other hand, the descent of the protagonist in "The Pit and the Pendulum" takes up only a brief portion of the plot. Reference to descent is made by the narrator in merely one sentence, but in an elongated sentence that suggests his encounter with vertical infinity: "These shadows of memory tell, indistinctly, of tall figures that lifted and bore me in silence down--down--still down--till a hideous dizziness oppressed me at the mere idea of the interminableness of the descent" (p. 247).

Montresor's burial vaults exist as a geography of infinite suggestiveness to the reader, a hieroglyph which

Fortunato fails to comprehend. Only the host and the reader are aware that the underground world is Fortunato's avenue to a living death. Montresor, like Poe himself, utilizes a kind of symbolic shorthand, playfully engaging the attention of his guest who fails to respond to the cues. While leading Fortunato through the vaults Montresor continually makes reference to ". . . the white web-work . . ." of nitre which gleams along the cavern walls. The substance, whose chemical composition is a form of potassium nitrate, is a salt-which forms in crystals on the ceilings of the vaults. Its color serves as one of Poe's recurring symbols of death. (The white cavern of Usher's painting or the white mist in Pym are illustrative.) Here, the white nitre, spread out through Montresor's vaults, becomes an extended image of the spectral, complementing the white bones piled high throughout the cavern. Together, Montresor and Fortunato pass through a wasteland of human remains in which Fortunato's source of pleasure, wine, is interspersed: "We had passed through walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the catacombs" (p. 276). The scene, similar to the one in "King Pest" (see Appendix to this chapter), foreshadows the climax of the story, as Fortunato, chained to the crypt, cries out for the *amontillado*.

Unlike the dungeon in "The Pit and the Pendulum," the crypt in "The Cask of Amontillado" is not merely a purgatorial experience; it is Hell, Fortunato's permanent

sanctuary, and the countermovement that takes place brings Montresor to the surface in his final vindication. The last scene of the story, however, climaxes the pictorialism that characterizes Poe's underground world. Montresor, like Poe himself, is an image-maker. With the bones that have been lying on the floor of the crypt he builds onto the new masonry a symbol of the dead guarding the dead. (In this connection one thinks of the skeleton lashed to the masthead of the San Dominick in Melville's "Benito Cereno." But in this particular story Poe's "undercurrents of meaning" do not radiate as far as Melville's. The story merely ends with the tableau.) Like "The Pit and the Pendulum" the dramatic focus wavers between gratuitous crime and gratuitous punishment.

The two earliest stories of the category, "MS Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom" appear to have the same relation to their category that "Morella" and "Berenice" have to the marriage group; as early works they seem to be exploratory and, as such, they function as sample nightmares of premature burial. The charnel house qualities of the later stories in the category are noticeably absent in them. Although their dominant note is also terror, the terror is mixed with other feelings. Originating in the natural world, the grotesque in these stories also partakes of sublimity. The narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher," in his first impressions of the Usher domain, offers



what might be taken as an implicit distinction between the grotesque in nature and the grotesque found in man-made artifacts: "I know not how it was--but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded by spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of the half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible" (p. 231). In "MS Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom" the natural geography which the protagonists encounter is a fusion of both the grotesque and the sublime. If the recognized qualities of the sublime--the beautiful, the spiritual, the spectacular--are associated with heightened feeling, Poe manages to generate an aspect of the sublime through the grotesque; that is, through the creation of terror, an intense but untranscendental emotion. Unlike the emotions produced by an encounter with the sublime, the terror that issues from the grotesque is never sought after. The sublime attracts; the grotesque repels. In "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "The Cask of Amontillado" the world underground--dungeon, pit, burial vaults, and crypt--are man-made structures. Contrived by the human mind as places of imprisonment and torture, they seem to reflect man's own awareness of what is most fearful in himself--darkness, disorientation and immobility, archetypal elements of the unconscious. If Poe, in the first two stories of the

category, imitates nature, it is a landscape that exists within the unconscious. In "MS Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom" a good deal, though not all that is depicted, exists within the natural world; thus the grotesque is temporized by being endowed with poetic as well as terrifying qualities.

The narrator-protagonist in "MS Found in a Bottle" comes to the reader as the antithesis of Poe's transcendental man. Instead of being possessed of a hyperactive imagination, he claims that his is abnormally inactive:

I have often been reproached with the aridity of my genius; a deficiency of imagination has been imputed to me as a crime; and the Pyrrhonism of my opinions has at all times rendered me notorious. Indeed a strong relish for physical philosophy has, I fear, tinctured my mind with a very common error of this age--I mean the habit of referring occurrences, even the least susceptible of such reference, to the principles of that science . . . I have thought proper to premise thus much, lest the incredible tale I have to tell should be considered rather the raving of a crude imagination, than the positive experience of a mind to which the reveries of fancy have been a dead letter and a nullity. (p. 118)

Within Poe's moral framework, the narrator's preoccupation with science marks him as a flawed human being, a man guilty of violating the integrity of his human nature. Like the Faustian husband he deifies one of his faculties, in this case the intellect, at the expense of the rest. In addition to his "relish for Physical philosophy" he is interested in archeology, a vocation which also contributes to his spiritual dryness: ". . . I have been all my life a dealer in

antiquities, and have imbibed the shadows of fallen columns at Balbec, and Tadmora, and Persepolis, until my very soul has become a ruin. The man whose inner world is an arid wasteland experiences a form of poetic justice well suited to his crime. His sea journey takes on an imaginative dimension far beyond any dream he has ever had. What he encounters defies the ability of science or reason to explain. Here, the natural world seems to be used as a symbol of the narrator's own imagination, an imagination which rebels at its own impoverishment by producing spectacular images of awe and terror.

The narrator appears to have an Ishmael complex. He is a perennial traveler, a man ". . . having no other inducement than a kind of nervous restlessness which haunted . . . [him] as a fiend" (p. 118). On one of his journeys he boards a ship bound for the Archipelago Islands, but the geography that he encounters belongs literally and metaphorically to a realm far removed from his actual destination. If the Poe protagonist is not already isolated when we meet him (and he usually is) we follow his progress from communal experience to isolation. As usual with Poe, theme is often presented within the structure of the story as a movement. In "MS Found in a Bottle" two such movements exist: one is horizontal, the other vertical. The sea journey, initiating the horizontal movement, brings the narrator to a realm of uncharted geography where sea and sky, even in violence, lose

their conventional representations. The ocean world comes to exist for the narrator as nightmare content:

. . . We were enshrouded in pitchy darkness, so that we could not have seen an object at twenty paces from the ship. Eternal night continued to envelop us, all unrelieved by the phosphoric sea-brilliancy to which we had been accustomed in the tropics. We observed, too, although the tempest continued to rage with unabated violence, there was no longer to be discovered the usual appearance of surf, or foam, which had hitherto attended us. All around were horror, and thick gloom, and a black sweltering desert of ebony. . . . We were, however, well aware of having made farther to the southward than any previous navigators, and felt great amazement at not meeting with the usual impediments of ice. (pp. 120-121)

Poe's ingenuity, at this point, may seem somewhat facile, but it furnishes exactly the two conditions that he desired in fiction--effect and meaning. He intensifies the narrator's disorientation by having the vertical movement function at the same time that the horizontal one is taking place: "At times we gasped for breath at an elevation beyond the albatross--at times became dizzy with the velocity of our descent into some watery hell, where the air grew stagnant, and no sound disturbed the slumbers of the kraken" (p. 121). The narrator's remarks, however, also serve as a preparation for his most fearful encounter with the grotesque, most fearful because it is an experience least subject to rational analysis:

We were at the bottom of one of these abysses, when a quick scream from my companion broke fearfully upon the night. . . . Casting my eyes upwards, I beheld a spectacle which froze the current of my blood. At a terrific height directly above us, and upon the very verge of the precipitous descent, hovered a gigantic

ship of perhaps four thousand tons. Although upreared upon the summit of a wave more than a hundred times her altitude, her apparent size still exceeded that of any ship of the line or East Indianman in existence. . . . But what mainly inspired us with horror and astonishment, was that she bore up under a press of sail in the very teeth of that supernatural sea, and of that ungovernable hurricane. . . . For a moment of intense terror she paused upon the giddy pinnacle as if in contemplation of her own sublimity, then trembled, and tottered, and--came down. (p. 121)

The position of the narrator in relation to the ship exists as the paradigm of a universe completely destroyed of rationality.

At this point in the story, the gothic element moves completely away from what might be considered the credible gothic of "The Pit and the Pendulum" or "The Cask of Amontillado." Stephen L. Mooney, a perceptive critic of Poe, suggests that not one but two kinds of gothicism exist in the Poe corpus:

We may quickly discriminate between two varieties of the Gothic that depend upon the writer's point-of-view: supernatural Gothic and rational Gothic. The former view regards the events of the fiction as ultimately beyond the reach of human understanding and therefore admits inexplicable and fantastic details into the design; the latter, while admitting many of the same details and perhaps even more horrible ones, reserves an explanation, that in the end, by subterfuge and ingenious devices, clears away the mystery altogether and accounts for it on rational grounds. . . .<sup>4</sup>

"MS Found in a Bottle" would seem to fall under Mooney's heading of supernatural gothic; but whether supernatural or rational the two categories of Poe's fiction both possess the character of terrifying dreams. In this instance the

dream seems entirely appropriate to the dreamer. The man who has preoccupied himself with the ruins of the past is suddenly confronted with a manifestation of it (another motif of interpenetration of realms within the larger design). The narrator observes that the men on board ship are of great age and infirmity; their instruments, as well as the structure of the ship, appear ancient.

Once the mysterious merchant ship has risen from the abyss of the whirlpool, the movement of the story again follows a horizontal line. As the ship hurtles into the unknown, the narrator unconsciously daubs on a sail the word "DISCOVERY," as he meditates on the nature of the world that he has become a part of and the one he is bound for. The science that the voyager had so eagerly pursued is incapable of furnishing him with the slightest clue to the mysteries. In contrast to his sterile vocations, the journey carries him beyond the limited boundaries of the rational mind to a realm as yet unexplored by any living mortal. The remarks of Agathos in "The Power of Words" suggest that Poe's intentions in this story are allegorical: "Ah, not in knowledge is happiness, but in the acquisition of knowledge! In for ever knowing, we are for ever blessed; but to know all, were the curse of a fiend" (p. 440). The narrator of the story appears to be an object lesson (despite the fact that Poe detested stories that supplied morals) of such a man who has sacrificed his humanity for knowledge. His punishment is to

receive some kind of ultimate knowledge and then die with it: "It is evident that we are hurrying onward to some exciting knowledge--some never-to-be imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction" (p. 125). The final descent into the abyss of the whirlpool is prefaced by Poe's images of death: ". . . stupendous ramparts of ice, towering away into the desolate sky, and looking like the walls of the universe" (p. 125). As a foreshadowing of Narrative of A. Gordon Pym, the story introduces toward the climax of his journey what might indeed be his discovery--the ice, symbols of nothingness.

In "A Descent into the Maelstrom" the abyss proves to be only a temporary Hell, and the countermovement of ascent takes place allowing the protagonist a rebirth. In permitting the fisherman in this story to live and in predestining the narrator of "MS Found in a Bottle" to die, Poe seems to be dispensing justice like a god, but if as artist he plays god, his behavior toward man is not simply that of a capricious or vengeful deity. The plots of the fiction within the category appear to depict gratuitous punishment, but Poe's allusive evidence serves as markers of flawed human nature and provides a moral base for the gothic drama. Such allusive evidence seems to be absent, or at least in short supply, in "A Descent into the Maelstrom." The protagonist is presented as a hard-working fisherman who possesses much paternal feeling. (The man is unwilling to

take his sons on the fishing trip because of the dangers.) The only flaw that the protagonist might possibly be held accountable for is his willingness to take risks, but Poe does not suggest that risk-taking is morally suspect. On the contrary, guilty or innocent, Poe's protagonists are existentially heroic: they are individuals who are forced into crises situations supported with nothing but their limited human resources. The point is, however, that their resources are limited; consequently, their efforts are ridiculed, not by Poe, but by the universe itself.

All of the stories in the category have their point of reference in the now familiar literary archetype of the Descent into Hell.<sup>5</sup> The journey to the Underworld has as one of its main purposes moral shock value, the acquisition of a new moral perspective by the voyager. In "A Descent into the Maelstrom" there is also a significant relation between descent and perspective, but Poe treats the matter of perspective in his story as a physical or psychological, rather than a moral condition. Unlike other fictional voyagers, the altered perspective acquired by the Poe protagonist through the rigors of his ordeal does not possess a spiritually therapeutic value. On the contrary, the terrors of the abyss destroy a once balanced view of physical reality. In addressing the narrator of the story (a man who once again serves as Poe's human norm), the protagonist asserts: "Do you know I can scarcely look over this little



cliff without getting giddy?" (p. 127). The narrator's reply suggests his amazement at the guide's distorted view of natural objects:

The "little cliff," upon whose edge he had so carelessly thrown himself down to rest that the weightier portion of his body hung over it, while he was only kept from falling by the tenure of his elbow on its extreme and slippery edge--this "little cliff" arose, a sheer unobstructed precipice of black shining rock, some fifteen or sixteen hundred feet from the world of crags beneath us. (p. 127)

The faulty visual perspective is presented not merely as an aberration of the guide; it becomes established as a minor motif within the story through the narrator's references to Jonas Ramus, a man of science significantly enough, who has recorded his own observations of the maelstrom. From the narrator's point of view, however, the observations are found wanting in accuracy: "The ordinary account of this vortex had by no means prepared me for what I saw. That of Jonas Ramus, which is perhaps the most circumstantial of any, cannot impart the faintest conception either of the magnificence, or of the horror of the scene--or of the wild bewildering sense of the novel which confounds the beholder" (p. 129).

Throughout the category Poe has demonstrated the inadequacy of the rational faculty to function as the sole vehicle of knowledge. Those who rely upon it at the expense of the other faculties do so at the risk of impairing their ability to see and to know. The result is a distorted perspective. In "A Descent into the Maelstrom" the protagonist's

problem of perspective does not exist prior to the descent into the maelstrom. Poe's allusions to the imperfection of the rational faculty are directed only to Jonas Ramus, a scientific observer of natural phenomena. More than any of his other counterparts in the category, the protagonist deserves to be considered a victim. In this story the universe exists for the purpose of demonstrating its awesome power, and like God it presumes to be above human understanding. The only instance in the story in which the protagonist attempts to make use of his rational faculties (while in the maelstrom) proves futile.

I have already described the unnatural curiosity which had taken the place of my original terrors. It appeared to grow on me as I drew nearer and nearer to my dreadful doom. I now began to watch, with a strange interest, the numerous things that floated in our company. I must have been delirious, for I even sought amusement in speculating on the relative velocities of their several descents toward the foam below. 'This fir-tree,' I find myself at one time saying, 'will certainly be the next thing that takes the awful plunge and disappears,'--and then I was disappointed to find that the wreck of a Dutch merchant ship overtook it and went down before. . . . (pp. 137-138)

It is only through insight (e.g., "'It was not a new terror that thus effected me, but the dawn of a more exciting hope. This hope arose partly from memory, and partly from present observation'"), rather than through any rationalist methodology, that the protagonist is able to save his life.

Noticing that barrels in the vortex of the maelstrom maintained a stable position, the protagonist lashes himself to the water cask on board his ship and hurls himself into the

water to be cast to the surface as the whirlpool diminishes. The reader is led to believe that the protagonist, far from having any special predisposition to science and its language, finds it difficult to cope with it as a rationalist discipline: "I have had several conversations on this subject with an old school-master of the district; and it was from him that I learned the use of the words 'cylinder' and 'sphere.' He explained to me--although I have forgotten the explanation--how what I observed was, in fact, the natural consequence of the forms of the floating fragments . . ." (p. 138). Divorced from any rationalist vocation or avocation, the narrator has committed himself only to the principle of survival. Significantly enough, the commitment involves a relationship with the Other. As a foreshadowing of Ishmael (in Moby Dick), a man who uses a coffin as a lifebuoy, the protagonist weds himself to an inorganic object. Going about the business of survival, he himself becomes an object of the grotesque, while the brother, who has failed to realize the possibility of survival inherent in a barrel, perishes.

Published in 1844, "The Premature Burial" comes later in the Poe canon than "The Pit and the Pendulum," "MS Found in a Bottle," and "A Descent into the Maelstrom." Its chronological position within the category suggests that Poe had brought the idea of premature burial to an aesthetic plateau. In this instance Poe does not use an actual cavern as the setting. Premature burial is a condition which the

narrator-protagonist experiences awake or sleep. The geography of the story resides within the psyche. The work is especially significant to the category because of the explicitness of its themes. In a sense "The Premature Burial" is Poe's version of Pope's "Essay on Man." The remarks that the narrator furnishes at the end of the story are a kind of neo-classical compendium on human behavior. That Poe could go on to write the later work, "The Cask of Amontillado," is merely evidence that his earlier fictional interests had reasserted themselves. Poe's oscillation between the fictional and thematic modes is simply further testimony to the fact that the thought of the writer is elusive. Poe was not a systematic philosopher or social critic who developed his ideas in an unbroken sequence. "The Premature Burial" is, perhaps, the only instance in the canon in which a work of an essentially fictional character changes abruptly into an abbreviated philosophic discourse.<sup>6</sup>

The first paragraph of "The Premature Burial" illustrates the difficulty of trying to locate Poe's own voice in his fiction:

There are certain themes of which the interest is all absorbing, but which are too entirely horrible for the purposes of legitimate fiction. These the mere romanticist must eschew, if he do not wish to offend, or to disgust. They are with propriety handled only when the severity and majesty of truth sanctify and sustain them. We thrill, for example, with the most intense of "pleasurable pain" over the accounts of the Passage of Beresina, of the earthquake at Lisbon, of the massacre of St. Bartholomew, or of the stifling of the hundred and twenty-three

prisoners in the Black Hole of Calcutta. But, in these accounts, it is the fact--it is the reality--it is the history which excites. As inventions we should regard them with simple abhorrence. (p. 258)

We should be aware here that Poe is having a joke at his own expense. In such fragmentary stories as "A Predicament" or "Loss of Breath" Poe often parodies his own fictional themes and techniques. We are never meant to take these works as serious fiction. The parody at the beginning of "The Premature Burial," however, is more apparent than real. The narrator contends that the writer who dwells on the horrible should only do so if his material exists in "fact," "reality," or "history." In his Preface to the Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque, Poe considers the question of terror and concludes that the emotion is not merely a convention belonging to a given literary situation: "Let us admit for the moment, that the fantasy pieces . . . now given, are German or what not. Thus Germanism is the vein for the time being. Tomorrow I may be anything but German, as yesterday I was everything else. If in many of my practices terror has been my thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul" (Works, I, 150). The passage is strong evidence that Poe did not regard his fiction as mere gothic extravaganza meant merely to entertain. The "fact," "reality," and "history" that he concerned himself with were of the soul.

The narrator-protagonist of "The Premature Burial," for nearly half the story, furnishes a list of case histories

of individuals who have suffered the agonies of being buried alive. These illustrations serve as a preface to his own case history, an account which differs from all the others in that it has its origin in a nightmare. The nightmare itself, however, is indirectly prompted by the narrator's disease, catalepsy, which in itself is a form of premature burial:

. . . Sometimes the patient lies, for a day only, or even for a shorter period, in a species of exaggerated lethargy. He is senseless and externally motionless; but the pulsation of the heart is still faintly perceptible; some traces of warmth remain. . . . Then again the duration of the trance is for weeks--even for months; while the closest scrutiny, and the most rigorous medical tests, fail to establish any material distinction between the state of the sufferer and what we conceive of absolute death. . . . (p. 263)

But even during his hours of health the protagonist, awake or sleeping, becomes obsessed with charnel house fantasies, and he dwells on visions of men and women who have been buried before they were actually dead. To fend off the possibility of death through accidental premature burial, he engages in a series of rational enterprises. He exacts promises from his friends that under no circumstances are they to bury him until his body is decomposed. He remodels the family vaults so that they can be opened from within. He makes arrangements for the admission of food and light within the vaults; but all of these precautions are futile gestures of self-reliance. While on a hunting trip, the protagonist falls asleep on board a boat anchored off shore,

and as a result of his cramped position in his berth a nightmare of premature burial is nourished. Although he has not actually been buried alive, his obsession with the possibility becomes his only reality, and psychologically he is continually buried alive. The protagonist's terror becomes his daily experience.

In this story we come full circle. The world of "The Pit and the Pendulum" is recreated, but in this instance the grotesque lies within the self. The man prone to obsessions experiences all the horror of entombment within the cell of his own body. Prior to his climactic nightmare, during fits of catalepsy ". . . all was void, and black, and silent, and Nothing became the universe . . ." (p. 264). The pit of "The Pit and the Pendulum," now existing within the human microcosm, produces ". . . a moral distress of infinitude . . ." (p. 264). If "The Pit and the Pendulum" is thought of as an allegorical journey into the depths of the unconscious, in "The Premature Burial" Poe removes completely the allegorical layer and lays bare the individual as the source of his own sickness and terror. The commentary that follows the protagonist's nightmare provides one of the few moments in Poe's fiction in which a fictional personality seems to speak for Poe. The implicit condemnation of obsessional behavior, whatever form it may take, exists both in the marriage group and in the stories of this category. In "The Premature Burial" the implicit becomes explicit:

The tortures endured . . . were indubitably quite equal, for the time, to those of actual sepulture. They were fearfully--they were inconceivably hideous; but out of Evil proceeded Good; for their very excess wrought in my spirit an inevitable revulsion. My soul acquired tone--acquired temper. I went abroad. I took vigorous exercise. I breathed the free air of Heaven. I thought upon other subjects than Death. I discarded my medical books. "Buchanan" I burned. I read no "Night Thoughts"--no fustian about churchyards--no bugaboo tales--such as this. In short I became a new man and lived a man's life. From that memorable night, I dismissed forever my charnel apprehensions, and with them vanished the cataleptic disorder, of which, perhaps, they had been less the consequence than the cause.

There are moments when, even to the sober eye of Reason, the world of our sad humanity may assume the semblance of Hell--but the imagination of man is no Carathis, to explore with impunity its every cavern. Alas! the grim legion of sepulchral terrors cannot be regarded as altogether fanciful--but, like the Demons in whose company Afrasiab made his voyage down Oxus, they must sleep, or they will devour us--they must be suffered to slumber, or we perish. (p. 268)

What we tend to discover in the fictional world of the category are humorless satires on self-reliance, especially when that self-reliance becomes a distortion of the Emersonian and Thoreauvian ethic. The narrator's encounter with the dungeon in "The Pit and the Pendulum" may rightfully be considered Poe's version of the Walden experience. The protagonists of both works exist in situations that test their individual resources and their human potential. Thoreau, of course, enters his world voluntarily in order to live deliberately and front the essential facts of life; the narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" is forced into his environment against his will and must try to survive in a universe bent



on his destruction. The parallels end here, for Poe does not subscribe to the Emersonian ethic in its totality. On the contrary, Poe was at odds philosophically with the American transcendentalists on matters of individual liberty and democracy. In "Mellonta Tauta," individual liberty and democracy both serve as the objects of his satire:

April 5th.--I am almost devoured by ennui. Pundit is the only conversible person on board; and he, poor soul! can speak of nothing but antiquities. He has been occupied all the day in the attempt to convince me that the ancient Americans governed themselves!--did ever anybody hear of such an absurdity?--that they existed in a sort of every-man-for-himself confederacy, after the fashion of the "prairie dogs" that we read of in fable. He says that they started with the queerest idea conceivable, viz: that all men are born free and equal--this in the very teeth of the laws of gradation so visibly impressed upon all things both in the moral and physical universe. . . . (p. 390)

In this category, self-reliance functions as a pathetic manifestation of individual liberty, and such behavior is often reflected in an overdependence on the rational faculties. The irony implicit in these stories is that self-reliance is impotent in a universe which man is incapable of really knowing or understanding. The protagonist of "The Pit and the Pendulum" is saved through the mechanical grace of the deus ex machina. The literal minded Fortunato, who fails to grasp imaginatively or intuitively the nature of his world, is trapped by his limited human faculties, as well as Montresor. The voyager in "The MS Found in a Bottle" is the most significant illustration of intellectual and spiritual sterility resulting from excessive self-reliance. The

protagonist of "A Descent into the Maelstrom" survives only when his purely speculative rational faculty gives way to insight. At the same time, however, Poe continues to suggest that imaginative as well as rational excesses (the protagonists of "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "The Premature Burial" are illustrative) are violations of human nature.

In one of his most acrid statements on science and scientific method, Poe (through his persona) derides the principles of Aristotelian and Baconian systems of logic for having impeded human progress:

. . . In all ages the great obstacles to advancement in Art have been imposed by the so-called men of science. To be sure, our men of science are not quite so bigoted as those of old:--oh, I have something so queer to tell you on this topic. Do you know that it is not more than a thousand years ago since the metaphysicians consented to relieve the people of the singular fancy that there existed but two possible roads for the attainment of Truth! Believe it if you can! It appears that long, long ago, in the Night of Time, there lived a Turkish philosopher (or Hindoo possibly) called Aries Tottle. This person introduced, or at all events propogated what was termed the deductive or a priori mode of investigation . . . Aries Tottle fell into disrepute; but finally he recovered ground and was permitted to divide the realm of Truth with his more modern rival. The savants now maintained that the Aristotelian and Baconian roads were the sole possible avenues to knowledge. . . . (p. 387)

The alternative to the deductive and inductive methods, the narrator declares, is the imagination, the agency of the soul:

Now I do not complain of the ancients so much because their logic is, by their own showing, utterly baseless, worthless and fantastic altogether, as because of their pompous and imbecile proscription of all other roads of Truth, of all other means for its

attainment than the two preposterous paths--the one of creeping and the one of crawling--to which they have dared to confine the Soul that loves nothing so well as to soar. (p. 388)

If the marriage group concerns itself with the overextended use of the imagination, the emphasis in "Premature Burials" seems to be on the opposite aberration, the poverty of the rationalist mind and the ultimate absurdity of self-reliance. Such behavior leads to spiritual descent and the aesthetics of the grotesque.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. T. H. Johnson, Vol. III (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), p. 1156.

<sup>2</sup>Isabel Gamble MacCaffrey, Paradise Lost as "Myth" (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), p. 69.

<sup>3</sup>The aesthetics of the grotesque, as well as the fear of the abyss, are also reflected in Dickinson's poetry. The licence of metaphor makes it easy to pass over the interpenetration of realms that occurs in such a poem as "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain," e.g., "As all the Heavens were a Bell,/And Being but an Ear. . . ."

<sup>4</sup>Stephen L. Mooney, "Poe's Gothic Wasteland," Sewanee Rev., LXX (Spring, 1962), 262.

<sup>5</sup>The classic treatment of the journey is in Maud Bodkin's Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (New York, 1958).

<sup>6</sup>"The Power of Words," The Colloquy of Monos and Una," and "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" are examples of philosophical discourses in Poe in which the fictional element is absent almost entirely.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ANIMAL REALM

No classicist or rationalist, armed with the Aristotelian definition of man as the rational animal, could have been exposed to such a welter of humanity and still have retained his ancient convictions. What Dostoevski saw in the criminals he lived with is what he finally came to see at the center of man's nature: contradiction, ambivalence, irrationality. There was a childishness and innocence about these criminals, along with brutality and cruelty, altogether not unlike the murderous innocence of a child. The men he knew could not be categorized as a criminal type and thus isolated from the rest of the species, man; these criminals were not "types," but thoroughly individual beings; violent, energetic, intensely living shoots from the parent stalk. In them Dostoevski was face to face with the demoniacal in human nature: perhaps man is not the rational but the demoniacal animal.<sup>1</sup>

Whenever a civilization has lived in terms of a certain image of man, we can see this image in its art; sometimes the image is present even when it was never articulated in thought,<sup>2</sup> the artist in this way anticipating the philosopher.

Unlike the relationship of Helen and Faust, the concern of the first chapter, the association of man and animal that falls under the heading, "The Animal Realm," is a symptom rather than a cause of the grotesque. The source of the grotesque is to be discovered in the resurgence of man's lower nature which dominates and controls him at the expense of his humanity, but the sense of the grotesque is

conveyed dramatically, through the interaction of man and animal. In the stories belonging to this category, animals have an appropriate symbolic value; when they appear, they serve to objectify human bestiality. The category, similar to the first two, explores a disproportionate element in the constellation that makes up human nature, but there is a significant difference in the characterization of the protagonist here. In the marriage group, and in the stories concerning premature burial, he unintentionally brings about the destruction of others or, for that matter, his own destruction. (The obvious exception is "The Cask of Amontillado.") In striking contrast the protagonists in this category are guilty of conscious acts of aggression. They are criminals in the generally accepted sense of the word and the least redeemable of Poe's men. Their lower nature is presented in terms of an animal image, but from the standpoint of a Freudian psychologist that element, which wields so much control over human behavior, would be referred to as the unconscious. As a psychological reference, the term is morally neutral, but Poe as a creative artist, despite critical opinions to the contrary, is not. The fiction presents man as depraved--Poe, however, does not attempt to distinguish between moral and psychological depravity--and his punishment is always provided for. Thus the animal that penetrates man's realm objectifies man's separation from his humanity.

By placing man and animal in dramatic juxtaposition to each other, Poe once again raises the problem of perspective. This time, however, the problem seems to exist as a challenge to the reader rather than as the dramatization of a visual or psychological impediment suffered by a character within the fiction. Through the use of juxtaposition the reader is jarred into the recognition that man may indeed be more bestial than an animal, and that the traditional separation argued by Christian theology is untenable. Aside from its symbolic values, the animal serves an additional function in these stories. In every one, it is the agency of moral redress. Similar to Poe's women who ascend from the dead, or the terrifying pits into which man descends, the animal mysteriously appears as a scourge, afflicting the criminal with physical or psychological punishment. But the movements that are normally associated with the grotesque are not clearly a part of the fictional structure of these stories. Vertical or horizontal movements fail to materialize as part of the design. Poe's gothic is largely supernatural gothic and it precludes following a credible line of physical action. Animal, or the symbol for what is animal, intrudes itself into man's realm under completely inexplicable circumstances.

Poe's rendering of the grotesque in this category is analogous to the image of the centaur, a mythical figure whose crude behavior was reflected in a body that was half

man and half horse. In the fiction, the idea of man as animal is dramatically and pictorially underscored: first through man's actions, and second through his associations with animal, a visual point of reference. Yet the reader need not move back to the mythical past in order to discover a source for the man-animal image: La Fontaine, Voltaire and Swift also make use of the relationship as a comment on man's uncertain humanity.<sup>4</sup> But if the image exists as part of a dim past, a period in which magic could easily transform man into animal or animal into man, in its myths and legends, it has a special significance for the nineteenth century. Change and transformation existed not only as part of a supernatural consciousness that expressed itself in literature (as in The Tales of Hoffman) but also as part of an emergent scientific consciousness.

All of Poe's stories were published on the threshold of Darwin's Origin of Species (1859). The earliest story of Poe's group, "Metzengerstein," was printed in 1832, only twenty-seven years before, at a time when evolutionary thought had begun to influence both scientists and philosophers more than at any other moment of the past.<sup>5</sup> Thus as scientists pondered the idea that animal evolved into man, Poe explored in fictional terms the reverse process. If life was no longer static, no longer thought of as a fixed chain of being, but rather as a fluid medium, man could conceivably cross over the boundaries once again and become a



more primitive form of being. The stories of this category are concerned with just such a phenomenon. Thematically they are studies in human regression.

Five stories establish the basis of the category: "Metzengerstein" (1832), "The Black Cat" (1843), "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), "Four Beasts in One" (1836), and "Hop-frog" (1849). Although Narrative of A. Gordon Pym (1838) appears to have much in common with these stories, its relationship to the category is marginal. Like the others, Pym also involves man in a relationship with the animal realm, with the primitive. The plot of the novel, however, uses a literal rather than a supernatural movement into a geography where man and animal seem to be associated with some hitherto undiscovered form of primal life. Pym's encounter, similar to that of his counterparts, also produces a sense of mystery and terror, but here Poe employs no single objective correlative for the grotesque (i.e., a horse, a cat, a vulture-like eye, or a beating heart). The grotesque manifests itself variously--in the cannibalism of Pym and his friends (their forced reduction to animal behavior) or in the newly discovered forms of plant and animal life. The fundamental difference between the novel and the short stories that separates it from the category lies in the characterization of the protagonist. Each story in the category presents him as criminal and subhuman. Pym

is neither criminal nor subhuman, and therefore the animal realm does not function as a symbolic extension of him or as a moral scourge. Nevertheless Poe's use of the grotesque in the novel helps to illuminate many of the themes and motifs in the other fiction. The conclusion to the chapter will supply additional comment on it.

The action that takes place within the category follows an almost invariable pattern. An animal presence (or animals) intrudes into the life of the protagonist and becomes an instrument of his destruction or near destruction, often at what appears to be a critical point in his moral history. Instead of submitting to the control of the man, the animal conversely exercises an uncanny control over him. In "Metzengerstein" a horse materializes (or seems to materialize) from a tapestry to become the constant companion of Frederick Baron Metzengerstein, his only intimate contact with any living thing. "The Black Cat" presents a similar mysterious occurrence: an exact replica, in all but one detail, of a cat which the protagonist has killed appears in a tavern, "in a den of more than infamy," and attaches itself to him out of all the other inhabitants in it. "The Tell-Tale Heart" serves as a slight variant on the first two stories. Here Poe employs the synecdoche for animal, the vulture-like eye of an old man and his beating heart, organs invested with seemingly preternatural qualities and charged with a life of their own. "Hopfrog" and "Four Beasts

in One" are also variants in their presentation of what is animal. In the former the animal presence linked with man is a dwarf, a deformed creature who is treated by his king as an entertaining but subhuman species of life. The latter is a satire, and the fictional element of the story tends to be thin. The narrator returns to the past with a contemporary man in order to witness the bestiality of a depraved king and his subjects. The animals in this story, domesticated beasts, in a satiric tour de force, lose their civilized ways and become involved in chasing the king through the streets. Here Poe provides the only literal movement in the category, and it is comic rather than gothic.

" . . . At the very time of which I speak," begins the narrator of "Metzengerstein," there existed in the interior of Hungary, a settled although hidden belief in the doctrines of Metempsychosis" (p. 672). Here the supernatural dimension of the story and the grotesque are complements to each other. Metempsychosis, or the doctrine of migration of souls (originally associated with the occult in Judaism and pre-judaic cultures) was, in essence, a theodicy, an attempt to explain human existence before, during, and after life; in particular it referred to the migration of souls from a higher to a lower form of being. Such a descent could be considered a just punishment for man's evil in a prior existence. The "Metzengerstein" narrator introduces his statement on metempsychosis at the beginning of the story and thereby

supplies a moral frame of reference for the development of the grotesque within the fiction.

Centering around the two remaining male members of two feuding families, Berlifitzing and Metzengerstein, the story is strikingly similar to "The Fall of the House of Usher." A fateful prophecy foretells their death, and since both men are the only remaining issue it augurs the complete destruction of the families and their way of life, terminating a history of human bestiality. In attempting to account for the mutual hostility of the families, the narrator goes beyond the prophecy and attempts to establish the actual basis of their enmity, the historical causes underlying the operations of the grotesque in the story: both the Berlifitzings and the Metzengersteins exercised rival influences in the government, and their conflict was all the more intensified by the fact that their estates were contiguous to each other. The last two members of the respective families inherit the aggressive tendencies of their ancestors and continue true to their line: "Wilhelm, Count Berlifitzing . . . was . . . remarkable for nothing but an inordinate and inveterate personal antipathy to the family of his rival, and so passionate a love of horses, and of hunting, that neither bodily infirmity, great age, nor mental incapacity, prevented his daily participation in the dangers of the chase" (p. 671). Baron Metzengerstein, although only in his eighteenth year, is equally prone to violence:

Upon the succession of a proprietor so young, with a character so well known, to a fortune so unparalleled, little speculation was afloat in regard to his probable course of conduct. And, indeed, for the space of three days, the behavior of the heir out-Heroded Herod, and fairly surpassed the expectations of his most enthusiastic admirers. Shameful debaucheries--flagrant treacheries--unheard of atrocities--gave his trembling vassals quickly to understand that no servile submission on their part--no punctilios of conscience on his own--were thenceforward to prove any security against the remorseless fangs of a petty Caligula. (p. 673)

Poe, like Picasso a hundred years later, portrayed human nature on its most primitive level. (Picasso's *La Guernica* uses a gigantic horse to symbolize the nature of war and the beast that man becomes when he reverts to it.) Berlifitzing and Metzengerstein lose what has classically been considered the essence of human identity--the balance between reason and emotion. They become one with their impulses; the decorum of their inner world, as well as their outer world, i.e., their contiguous estates, is shattered.

Metzengerstein contemplates only acts of conquest and brutality. While the stables of Berlifitzing mysteriously burn, Metzengerstein studies a tapestry portraying his notorious family history. The images of war function as a kind of momento mori, impressing themselves on his consciousness and fixing his mind to thoughts of violence. It is precisely at this moment in the story that the supernatural dimension emerges generating our sense of the grotesque:

But as the Baron listened, or affected to listen, to the gradually increasing uproar in the stables of Berlifitzing--or perhaps pondered upon some more novel, some more decided act of audacity--his eyes were turned

unwittingly to the figure of an enormous, and unnaturally colored horse, represented in the tapestry as belonging to a Saracen ancestor of the family of his rival. The horse itself, in the foreground of the design, stood motionless and statue-like--while, farther back, its discomfited rider perished by the dagger of a Metzengerstein.

On Frederick's lips arose a fiendish expression, as he became aware of the direction which his glance had, without his consciousness, assumed. Yet he did not remove it. On the contrary, he could by no means account for the overwhelming anxiety which appeared falling like a pall upon his senses. It was with difficulty that he reconciled his dreamy and incoherent feelings with the certainty of being awake. The longer he gazed the more absorbing became the spell--the more impossible did it appear that he could ever withdraw his glance from the fascination of that tapestry. But the tumult without becoming suddenly more violent, with a compulsory exertion he diverted his attention to the glare of ruddy light thrown full by the flaming stables upon the windows of the apartment.

The action, however, was but momentary; his gaze returned mechanically to the wall. To his extreme horror and astonishment, the head of the gigantic steed had, in the meantime, altered its position. The neck of the animal, before arched, as if in compassion, over the prostrate body of its lord, was now extended, at full length, in the direction of the Baron. The eyes, before invisible, now wore an energetic and human expression, while they gleamed with a fiery and unusual red; and the distended lips of the apparently enraged horse left in full view his sepulchral and disgusting teeth. (p. 674)

The man whose behavior has been marked by its animalism is mysteriously provided with a horse of prodigious size bearing the initials W. V. B. (The story also hints at Berlifitzing's transformation from man to animal, a grim form of self realization.) From the moment it is brought to him by his servants, the animal becomes Metzengerstein's constant companion, what might be also termed his elective affinity; but the images of man and horse, as representatives

of different realms of being, are curiously lacking in definitiveness. One living organism appears to have taken on the identity of the other. Our perspective, our traditional orientation is disturbed, and the limbo world of the grotesque once again records itself on the reader's consciousness, as well as on the consciousness of the protagonist. Metzengerstein's behavior has revealed the man as something less than human, and the horse is graphically depicted as something more than animal: ". . . It is said there were times when the animal caused the crowd to recoil in horror from the deep and impressive meaning of his terrible stamp--times when the young Metzengerstein turned pale and shrunk away from the rapid and searching expression of his human-looking eye" (p. 677).

In such stories as "Ligeia," "The Cask of Amontillado," as well as "Metzengerstein," the punishment experienced by the protagonist is to receive what he actually desires. The husband of Ligeia once again witnesses his wife, but only as a vampire returned from the dead. Fortunato finally receives his Amontillado, but only as a prisoner chained within a burial vault. Metzengerstein also experiences what his nature craves, a fuller realization of his animal nature, and this ironic fulfillment comes about through his association with the horse: "In the glare of noon--at the dead hour of night--in sickness or in health--in calm or in tempest--the young Metzengerstein seemed riveted to the saddle of that

colossal horse, whose intractable audacities so well accorded with his own spirit" (p. 676). Metzengerstein, existing in isolation, without any form of human contact and communication other than in his relations with his servant, is finally forced into a relationship, but one which imprisons rather than liberates. In a distorted Emersonian sense, the horse exists as a form of Otherness, the Not Self, the only reality outside of his private world. His alternative to human society is a marriage to the subhuman, a supernatural commitment not of his own making. Poe, however, does not end the story on this bizarre rendering of a transcendental idea; the relationship between man and horse does not remain a static symbol; its implications emerge fully only at the end of the story, and are supported by another symbol--a second mysterious fire. Poe, in this way, establishes an additional allusive reference to animal nature. To act on a purely instinctual level is to be destructive to others but, more important, it is to be self-destructive, self-consuming. After mysteriously riding out one night, Metzengerstein returns to discover that his castle is completely enveloped by fire, and both horse and rider disappear into the flames ". . . while a white cloud of smoke settled heavily over the battlements in the distinct colossal figure of--a horse" (p.678). The destruction of Metzengerstein by fire is an unmistakable reference to the rapid disintegration of a personality charged only with animal energies and animal



values. Shakespeare's Albany puts Poe's story into significant moral perspective when he declares: "If that the heavens do not their visible spirits/ Send quickly down to tame these vile offenses,/ It will come,/ Humanity must perforce prey on itself,/ Like monsters of the deep."

Paralleling "Metzengerstein" closely in the uses of the grotesque is "The Black Cat." In this story Poe does not establish the man-as-animal theme initially as he does in the former story. Here Poe seems to be interested in illustrating the tenuous thread that separates man's humanity from his bestiality. In his recapitulation of events leading up to his imminent execution, the narrator-protagonist emphasizes his original powers of sympathy and benevolence and presents himself as a man who held a general reverence for life:

From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. I was especially fond of animals, and was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets. With these I spent most of my time, and never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them. This peculiarity of character grew with my growth, and, in my manhood, I derived from it one of my principal sources of pleasure. To those who have cherished an affection for a faithful and sagacious dog, I need hardly be at the trouble of explaining the nature or the intensity of the gratification thus derivable. There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man. (p. 223)

The protagonist marries someone who shares his sympathies for animals, and they procure a variety of what they consider

the most agreeable kind, including a cat which becomes the husband's favorite. The relationship of man and animal, as it exists at the beginning of the story, is benign. They live in harmony with each other; the man remains a kindly master to the cat, and in turn it continues to remain dependent on man. The balance of life is upset, however, when the master falls prey to the "Fiend Intemperance." Once his frenzy is aroused his human nature, which Poe shows to be mercurial, becomes the opposite of what it was. From the most humane of men he becomes demonic. Because of a scratch which the once favorite cat, Pluto, inflicts on him, he mutilates it: "The fury of a demon possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once to take flight from my body; and more than fiendish malevolence, gin nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame. I took from my wastecoat pocket a penknife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket!" (p. 224). Although the protagonist looks with horror upon his act, he does not accept full moral responsibility for it. He attributes his behavior to what he calls "the Spirit of Perverseness." In a way Poe might be said to have anticipated Freud's concept of the unconscious. "Of this spirit," he remarks, "philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart--one of the indivisible primary faculties, or

sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man" (p. 225). In any discussion of the unconscious the correlative term repression is also used. In Poe's protagonist repression does not exist as a censor for those forces that are labelled by the cover term unconscious. As a result those impulses and desires, usually checked by some kind of censoring agency in most men, come to the surface. His thought and feeling, i.e., heart and head, no longer in balance with each other, the protagonist hangs the cat: "--hung it with tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offense; hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin--a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it--if such a thing were possible--even beyond the reach of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God" (p. 225).

The protagonist functions as both spectator and actor in a personal drama over which he seems to have no control. As spectator, his observations about his behavior strike responsive chords in his conscience; he demonstrates an awareness that his inclinations are subhuman. As actor the protagonist fulfills the dictates of his impulses and brutalizes his once loved cat. Quite aside from the emergence of the grotesque, as a punitive agency within the story, the narrator is himself a grotesque. Like the mythic

centaur he conveys a double image: in his possession of a conscience and a moral sense, he is human; but his uncontrollable instincts also identify him as animal. He himself is a curious fusion of realms.

Poe's fictional world lacks stability; nothing remains permanently fixed in its place. Animals, as well as people, although dead, may reappear to haunt those who have been responsible for their destruction. Thus when the protagonist visits a tavern, a second Pluto appears, and immediately shows its preference for the man and becomes a favorite of the wife once it is taken home. In proportion to the cat's partiality for its master, the man's aversion to the animal increases: "Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk it would get between my feet and thus nearly throw me down, or, fastening its long and sharp claws in my dress, clamber, in this manner, to my breast" (p. 227). Driven to a furious hatred of the animal, the man is about to kill it but instead kills his own wife as she intervenes for its life. The cat, however, becomes the instrument of the husband's punishment when its cries reach the police from within the basement wall that serves as the wife's tomb: "The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose

craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman" (p. 230).

The grotesque and the moral law once again appear to coexist in relation to each other in Poe's fiction. In this respect Poe's literature, at least a large part of it, falls squarely within the mainstream of English literature. From Shakespeare through Coleridge, when divine laws have been broken, the violations are expressed in disorders in nature. Storms of an unprecedented nature (e.g., King Lear) or anarchy within the animal kingdom (e.g., Julius Caesar) serve as organs of protest for the universe. These disorders, in their way, foreshadow the grotesque as it occurs in Coleridge and Poe. In Coleridge, for example, the killing of the Albatross is an act of moral outrage which sets off the processes of the grotesque, i.e., the encounter with the ship of the dead, the slimy things that crawl on top of the water. The outrage, however, is followed by an act of redemption, and the various manifestations of the grotesque disappear. The ancient mariner once again finds himself reunited with the universe. In contrast, Poe's protagonist tries to evade the moral responsibilities for his crime. (This aspect of the character suggests a major theme in Poe-- the quest for a more than human identity, a characteristically Faustian aspiration.) In "The Black Cat" the cat as the central vehicle for the grotesque mysteriously disappears and reappears; as a consequence, the protagonist's anguish rises

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and falls in relation to its appearance or absence. The terrors of the grotesque are sustained throughout the story not only because Poe is interested in terror (He claims, of course, that unity of effect should be the primary concern of every writer) but also for the purposes of poetic justice. The cat, however, carries a two-fold function: besides its punitive role, it is also a highly evocative symbol of the animal aspect of human nature. That the protagonist has sunk to the level of an infuriated beast is reflected in his actions, and the beast in the man, similar to the animal standing on the head of the dead wife, triumphs over what might be called the feminine side of his psyche, his sympathy and humanity.

The bases for the grotesque in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the vulture-like eye and the beating heart, are less ambiguously supernatural than their animal counterparts in the first two stories, and they function as a realm apart from the human to which they seem to be grafted; they exist independently of the old man. Even the victim of the story is not free from an association with the grotesque, at least from the point of view of the narrator-protagonist. We must never forget that we view the world from his perspective; on the one hand he regards the old man as innocent of any evil; on the other, the evil eye is lodged with him and therefore the old man must die. The plot is fundamentally that simple and, consequently, it seems to generate a greater allegorical

sense, although not a clearly directed allegorical scheme, than we have in other stories of Poe. The work is literally stripped bare of any kind of action, and it makes no attempt to offer causal explanations for behavior. The fiction imitates, in the Aristotelian sense, a bizarre action, but no attempt is made to explain it. The protagonist himself is not entirely sure of his own motives in killing the person whom he refers to as the old man: "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 this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture-- a pale blue 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" (p. 303). The protagonist has come to his decision while suffering a nameless disease. The malady sharpens his faculties, but at the same time it creates a man of warped transcendental sensibilities: "Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell" (p. 303). Poe appears to use this particular disease as an identifying trait of the Faustian personality. While in the throes of his illness, the protagonist sets out to create what he thinks will be the perfect murder. His nature illustrates what might be considered Poe's version of Original Sin because the narrator's acts of commission are the fundamental

bases for the punishment and anguish that all Poe's protagonists undergo and therefore are the counterpart of the traditional theological idea. For Poe the sin involves man's behaving as though he were more than human or conversely less than human. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" the protagonist considers himself above mankind in his mental faculties, but in his actions he functions on a subhuman level.

The movements associated with the grotesque in "The Tell-Tale Heart" are primarily symbolic rather than, in any significant sense, dramatic. The first violation of boundaries has already taken place at the moment the story begins. The eye has intruded itself on the consciousness of the protagonist who suffers under its scrutiny. Poe does not go beyond vague suggestion here, and the "undercurrents of meaning" seem to defy any sort of strict analysis; but slim as they are, they do lend themselves to one fairly obvious reading. The protagonist's vexations by the mysterious animal presence of the eye seems to be tied up with a fear of discovery. The sanctuary of his private world has been broken. (Kafka's protagonists also suffer from the fear that they are continually being watched.) The protagonist is presented in the light of predator, however, rather than prey. As predator he crosses over into the realm of the evil eye, literally the room of the old man.

The activity that takes place in the room alternates between the protagonist's feline actions and his



psychological self-revelations: "Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or grief--oh, no!--it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening with its dreadful echo the terrors that distracted me" (p. 304). The ability of the narrator to suffer fear, perhaps the fear that is so characteristic of twentieth century man, nameless anxiety, reinforces the doubleness of his nature: his identity hovers somewhere between man and animal for a time, but finally it is the animal identity which becomes firmly established. The dismembering of the old man's corpse climaxes the protagonist's predatory activities. Once the public world imposes itself on him in the persons of the police, the protagonist assumes the role of the civilized man (now only a role), using charm and manners as his disguise:

I smiled,--for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search--search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat,

and while I answered cheerily, they chatted familiar things. (p. 306)

It is at this point that the last movement associated with the grotesque makes itself known. The beating heart, which no one but the protagonist can hear, establishes what might be considered a countermovement in the fiction. (The heart serves the same moral and dramatic purposes that the return of Ligeia and Morella serve in their respective stories.)

The heart, as a supernatural agency or as a manifestation of the protagonist's own heart, i.e. a sense of guilt, moves out of its rightful sphere to engage the attention of the criminal. (He has already indicated, at the outset, that his sense of hearing is acute.) The heart as an instrument of the grotesque effects another moral confrontation.

Although "Four Beasts in One" and "Hopfrog" were published six years apart from each other, they function as companion pieces within the category. Both are scathing satires reminiscent of Swift. Here the shroud of mystery that hangs over "Metzengerstein," "The Black Cat," or "The Tell-Tale Heart" is missing. Having removed all vestiges of ambiguity pertaining to the supernatural, Poe lifts the veil that tended to obscure, to some extent, the thematic concerns of his other stories. The satires serve as explicit statements on man's more than animal nature. The protagonists of these stories are not symbolically presented as beasts; they consciously put on costumes that are animal

disguises; they, in fact, take pride in parading as animals. "Four Beasts in One" and "Hopfrog," then crystallize unmistakably the intentions of the other stories. The former story differs from the latter in only one respect--in the levity of its tone. It nearly turns out to be one of Poe's literary jokes, but "Four Beasts in One" achieves a coherence that Poe's literary jokes do not have. The story sustains a consistent thematic point of view through the use of the grotesque.

The narrator, appearing as a kind of moral historian, takes the reader on an imaginative journey to the city of Antioch, the epitome of a universe gone mad. Here animals are presented as civilized creatures and man takes on the character of a beast. "The lion, the tiger, and the leopard are entirely without restraint. They have been trained without difficulty to their present profession, and attend upon their respective owners in the capacity of valets-de-chambres" (p. 512). Man, on the other hand, seems to be possessed of the nature of animal, or what is usually thought of as animal in the worst possible sense. No less than the king of Antioch is characterized by his vicious impulses: "The king has ordered some novel spectacle--some gladiatorial exhibition at the hippodrome--or perhaps the massacre of the Scythian prisoners--or the conflagration of his new palace--or the tearing down of a handsome temple--or, indeed, a bonfire of a few Jews" (p. 512). Even the god of the populace exists

in the image of a beast: "True--a baboon; but by no means the less a deity" (p. 513). Poe's portrait of animal, man, and God lead up to the central comic action of the story--the king's escape from the rebellious animals who have been insulted by his use of an animal disguise: "The singular appearance of the camelopard with the head of a man, has, it seems given offense to the notions of propriety entertained in general by the wild animals domesticated in the city" (p. 515). The king escapes only by being swifter than his animal counterparts. Decorum, a supposedly human attribute, is presented here as a virtue of the animal, man's supposedly inferior ancestor. The story serves as the only instance in the category where the interpenetration of realms is essentially comic grotesque, and the effects of incongruity and inversion are humorous instead of terrifying.

The setting of "Hopfrog" suggests a renaissance court complete with king, counselors, and dwarf. The result, as is the case in "Four Beasts in One," is an aesthetic distance which enables the reader to assume that any relation between dramatis personae in the fiction and himself is purely coincidental; the technique is in the main tradition of English satire.

At the point at which the fiction begins, Hopfrog, the referent for animal, already exists in the court as the king's entertainer. The movements associated with the grotesque are essentially symbolic once again; they consist in

the physical transformation of the king and his counselors to an animal identity through the use of disguise. The boundary that separates man from animal, however, remains blurred and uncertain. Hopfrog is deformed; his movements resemble those of an animal: "The prodigious muscular power which nature seemed to have bestowed upon his arms, by way of compensation for deficiency in his lower limbs, enabled him to perform many feats of wonderful dexterity, where trees or ropes were in question, or anything else to climb. At such exercises he certainly much more resembled a squirrel, or a small monkey, than a frog" (p. 503). The king and his counselors are no nearer an ideal image of man than is Hopfrog: "They all took after the king, too, in being large, corpulent, oily men . . ." (p. 502). Morally, more than physically, it is man who is subhuman. Hopfrog's primary role is that of avenger, and he is indeed grotesque, a mixture of human calculation and animal vengeance, but he engenders pathos as well as terror.

The moral image of the king and his counselors is established at the beginning of the story; it is expressed in the king's behavior toward Hopfrog and Trippetta, Hopfrog's female counterpart. Both dwarfs are treated by the king as subhuman, as things, available merely for the purposes of entertainment. Hopfrog is forced to drink a bumper of wine against his will, a beverage which deeply upsets him. "He [the king] knew that Hopfrog was not fond of wine; for it

excited the poor cripple almost to madness" (p. 504). When Trippetta tries to intercede, the king throws the contents of the goblet in her face. The quality that perhaps most separates man from the beast, other than the intellectual faculties, is sympathy. The king, like many of Poe's protagonists, is entirely without it. Deprived of its temporizing influence, man's lower nature rebels and man becomes a moral grotesque: not quite human and not wholly animal.

As is the case with every story in the category, the inability--rather than the unwillingness--of man to control his passions is just ground for censure, and some form of retribution is always at hand. The king, having degraded his dwarfs, awakens the beast latent in Hopfrog, who retaliates for his injuries, and the emergence of the beast is signalled by a mysterious grating sound. The sound is accurately identified as originating with Hopfrog only when his revenge is near completion: "It came forth from the fang-like teeth of the dwarf, who ground them and gnashed them as he foamed at the mouth, and glared, with an expression of maniacal rage into the upturned countenances of the king and his seven companions" (p. 508).

It is indirectly through Hopfrog's consumption of wine that a form of poetic justice is conceived. The occasion for it is a masquerade in which king and counselors are disguised as ourang-outangs and chained to the chandelier. Here the moral and physical identity of the men finally

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unite, the outer appearance serving rather as a symbolic extension of the inner man than as a disguise. Hopfrog, as judge and executioner, conducts a mock trial and carries out the sentence himself in the form of a fiery death. His form of justice is witnessed by the court who are informed of the morality implicit in his jest:

"I now see distinctly," he said, "what manner of people these maskers are. They are a great king and his seven privy-councillors,--a king who does not scruple to strike a defenceless girl, and his seven councillors who abet him in the outrage. As for myself, I am simply Hopfrog, the jester--and this is my last jest."

Owing to the high combustibility of both the flax and the tar to which it adhered, the dwarf had scarcely made an end of his brief speech before the work of vengeance was complete. The eight corpses swung in their chains, a fetid, blackened, hideous, and indistinguishable mass. The cripple hurled his torch at them, clambered leisurely to the ceiling, and disappeared through the skylight.

Another transformation takes place. King and counselors undergo another spiritual reduction. From animal they turn into inorganic matter, a symbolic movement back to the inertness of essence. The only literal movement in the story involves ascent, and it is associated with Hopfrog's rebirth, in striking contrast to the death and dissolution of those in the court. Hopfrog escapes the boundaries of his world through the sky-light, in a kind of transcendental leap.

The definition of the grotesque that I have used in this study--the fusion of realms and categories--has tended to focus on matters of plot and action. The word grotesque,

used in a less specialized sense, refers also to a collection of qualities, as well as a dynamic part of the fictional structure. Nearly all definitions of the grotesque incorporate three elements: laughter, horror, and astonishment.<sup>6</sup> All three qualities comprise the response which the court makes to the king and his counselors. At first, the court is horrified by what appears to be a congregation of beasts in its presence: "As had been anticipated, there were not a few of the guests who supposed the ferocious looking creatures to be beasts of some kind in reality, if not precisely ourang-outangs" (p. 507). The horror, however, is suddenly seen in a new light: "The masqueraders, by this time, had recovered, in some measure, from their alarm; and, beginning to regard the whole matter as a well-contrived pleasantry, set up a loud shout of laughter at the predicament of the apes" (p. 507). When the king and his counselors are suddenly carried up thirty feet, tied to the chandelier, the mood of the company changes once again: "So thoroughly astonished was the whole company at this ascent, that a dead silence, of about a minute's duration, ensued" (p. 508). The sense of flux and uncertainty experienced by the court, through the constant manipulation of mood, serve as adjuncts to the main line of the grotesque action: the psychological shifts or discontinuity follow upon its heels.



Like Dostoevski, Poe presented man from a number of perspectives. If man could behave at times as a would-be rational animal, and as a super-rational animal, he could also appear, as Poe demonstrates in the stories of this category, in the form of a demoniacal animal. Poe, a metaphysical and moral investigator of man, charts in fictional terms what Darwin was to do in scientific terms during his voyage on the "Beagle." Poe's protagonists, also, move away from circumscribed human boundaries, the boundaries which constitute the world of feeling and moral behavior. We see the protagonists only in their new context, a twilight zone where these human landmarks no longer exist as points of orientation.

Poe's allegorical method in Narrative of A. Gordon Pym furnishes an illuminating contrast to the nature of the allegory in the tales. In Pym the grotesque is presented in anthropological rather than in moral terms. Poe once again establishes a movement into what is metaphorically the animal realm. Animals here are no longer supernatural manifestations serving a symbolic moral purpose, as well as formally expressing the starker aspects of human nature. In Pym the animal world is the world of objective fact (Poe, of course, attempts to provide a sense of verisimilitude similar to that presented in so much travel literature of the nineteenth century), and the primitive, in this case, exists outside the self.<sup>7</sup> Pym, however, is as helpless in

understanding and controlling his world as the subhuman protagonists are in understanding and controlling the primitive world that exists within. Strange forms of life, as well as portentous suggestions about the origin of human life, crowd in and impress themselves on his consciousness, but Pym's journey leads to no answers. Instead it raises unanswerable questions, leaving him geographically as well as intellectually dislocated. Poe, as a writer of fiction, adumbrates the effects that Darwin's publications were to have on the public a few years later.

For all intents and purposes, Darwin shattered the myth that man and animal existed in separate categories, as well as the long cherished belief that he was closer to angel than to animal. Here, science, instead of fiction, generated a sense of the grotesque. If Darwin destroyed an old orientation, he did not provide a clear-cut substitute. Man was now thought of as having descended from animal, but the matter of the relationship remained a blur and an enigma:

Darwin conceded that between the most precocious animal and the most primitive savage there was far greater difference than between the lowest barbarian and the most civilized man. A Fuegian was remarkably like an Englishman in disposition and mental faculties after only a few years' residence in England, whereas the most advanced animal could not approach the lowest savage in articulate speech. Nevertheless, he insisted that the wide range in mental power among both humans and animals proved that the difference between them was of degree only. The many gradations by which the lowest fishes were separated from the highest apes, and the savage from a Shakespeare, made him confident that the two orders must also have been linked by a series of fine gradations. But although he could give examples

of the links within each order, and even some explanation of how one link evolved from the next, at the crucial point of the transition between man and animal both illustration and explanation petered out.<sup>8</sup>

For Poe's protagonists, the association with representatives of the animal world produces terror as a moral scourge. For Darwin's readers, the upshot of the investigations of animal species resulted in controversy and perhaps a kind of grotesque self-discovery, at the same time evoking also moral terror.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>William Barrett, Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy (New York, 1958), p. 136.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>3</sup>Hawthorne and Conrad present similar studies in their fiction. "Young Goodman Brown" seems to be primarily concerned with illustrating what happens when a man loses all self control; having lost Faith, Brown, in addition, loses all sense of proportion and becomes more demonic than any of the terrors he encounters in the forest. In "Heart of Darkness" the white colonialists, in contrast to the hungry natives on board Marlow's boat, lose all pretensions to humanity and kill and plunder as though such activities were reflex actions.

<sup>4</sup>Davidson, p. 152.

<sup>5</sup>Evolutionary Thought in America, ed. by Stow Persons (New Haven, 1950), devotes a good deal of attention to the rise and impact of evolutionary thought in America during the nineteenth century.

<sup>6</sup>Clayborough, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup>Poe demonstrates an interest in all forms of the primitive, whether it be man, animal, geography, or the

universe. His Eureka, for example, is another investigation aimed with coming to grips with primal being. This time, however, Poe does not write in the mode of the grotesque. Here Poe once again becomes a register for the sensibility of the age as he provides a pseudo-scientific theory of creation: ". . . I now assert--that an intuition altogether irresistible, although inexpressible, forces me to the conclusion that what God originally created--that that matter which, by dint of his volition, he first made from his spirit, or from, Nihilility, could have been nothing but Matter in its utmost conceivable state of--what?--of Simplicity" (Works, XVI, 206).

<sup>8</sup>Gertrude Himmelfarb, Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution (New York, 1962), pp. 371-2.

## CHAPTER V

### MAN AS MECHANISM

The attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.<sup>1</sup>

For, obviously, the comic element in a drawing is often a borrowed one, for which the text supplies all the stock-in-trade. I mean that the artist may be his own understudy in the shape of satirist, or even playwright, and that then we laugh far less at the drawings themselves than at the satire or comic incident they represent. But if we devote our whole attention to the drawing with the firm resolve to think of nothing else, we shall probably find that it is generally comic in proportion to the clearness, as well as the subtleness, with which it enables us to see a man as a jointed puppet. The suggestion must be a clear one, for inside the person we must distinctly perceive, as though through a glass, a set-up mechanism. But the suggestion must also be a subtle one, for the general appearance of the person, whose every limb has been made rigid as a machine, must continue to give us the impression of a living being.<sup>2</sup>

One story in the preceding category, "Four Beasts in One," serves as a useful point of transition to the nature and function of the grotesque taken up in this chapter. Although it maintains the subject matter of the grotesque relevant to the category, the fusion of human and animal realms, it differs from the others in the group in that it belongs to a comic rather than a gothic mode (a stratum of

Poe's fiction often neglected in the usual anthologies). Here the dominant qualities of Poe's fiction, mystery and terror, are absent. The protagonist, the king of Antioch, experiences no psychological disorientation or dislocation. When the animals run after him, he merely outruns them. His characterization is feeble, and we are not particularly arrested by the response he makes to the sudden appearance of his predators. Poe substitutes humor and satire for the customary dread in a plot that involves a comic interpenetration of realms; and it follows that the problem of perspective is no longer experienced by the protagonist in what has often been presented as intense psychological drama. The protagonist in these stories is entirely at home in the world in which he lives; in fact, he knows that world thoroughly and nothing in it is a mystery to him. If he does suffer, the distress tends to be physical rather than psychological and, in any event, it is part of the comic conventions and never the occasion for any real anguish. Only in "The Man Who Was Used Up" is the problem of faulty perspective given dramatic significance within the category, but it is a fallible narrator who experiences it, not the ostensible central figure, Poe's grotesque protagonist. The narrator himself belongs to Poe's over-all satiric point of view. Throughout the category, the problem of perspective is presented basically as a moral problem to the reader. Thus it is the reader who experiences, through the fiction, the

effects of the grotesque, and Poe, as satirist, calculates his response, which, potentially, at least, is repugnance as well as amusement.

The stories in this chapter continue to deal with one of Poe's prevailing themes--dehumanization. In this respect they are closely allied to those of the preceding category, but the ones in this group are in sharp contrast to the others. They go beyond Poe's usual treatment of the protagonist, a man cut off from a recognizable social milieu, to include society at large in their focus. Satire, by its very nature, is an inclusive medium, and even though Poe may supply a nominal protagonist, the theme of dehumanization tends to include all members of society as well as one man. In this category our sense of the grotesque emerges through the image of man as a mechanism, and the implications associated with it suggest an acute sociological consciousness miniscule in the other categories. Bergson's view of what is comic in man turns out to be an accurate portrait of Poe's comic grotesque. Within the category man is presented as a literal mechanism (e.g. "The Man Who Was Used Up") or metaphorically as a mechanism (e.g. "The Business Man"), a human being whose behavior is closely allied to a constructed apparatus; nevertheless, the literal and the metaphorical mechanisms are closely related to each other. The individuals in these stories are hollow men, individuals obsessed with system, whose thoughts and actions constitute a series of



reflexes; but whether man is literally or metaphorically a mechanism, the roots of his grotesqueness remain the same: crass materialism, an obsession with order and method, an excessive preoccupation with the external affairs of society. The action in these stories, such as it is, takes place in the village or the city, a social rather than a geographical context, yet having more precise outline to it than the settings in Poe's gothic fiction. It is perhaps obvious to point out that the image of man as mechanism is not exclusive with Poe, but an obtrusive concern of nineteenth century writers and philosophers. The general subject of man's relation to the machine is taken up in Leo Marx's penetrating sociological study, The Machine in the Garden. Perhaps the excerpt of his book most pertinent to this chapter is a selection from Friederich Schiller's Letters Upon the Aesthetical Education of Man:

'Man himself, eternally chained down to a little fragment of the whole, only forms a kind of fragment; having nothing in his ears but the monotonous sound of the perpetually revolving wheel, he never develops the harmony of his being; and instead of imprinting the seal of humanity on his being, he ends by being nothing more than the living impress of the draft to which he devotes himself, of that science which he cultivates.'<sup>3</sup>

Stephen Mooney's comments on Poe offer themselves as a kind of footnote to those of Schiller: "A good deal of Poe's historical importance depends upon his special adaptation of the dehumanizing forces of the day. . . ."<sup>4</sup> The stories of the category utilize the aesthetics of the grotesque to

furnish an ironic image of nineteenth century man. But here the response that Poe evokes in the reader is laughter as opposed to terror. "To imitate anyone," Bergson declares, "is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person."<sup>5</sup> The mechanical men represented by Poe are products of the world they live in rather than products of nightmare, and they offer themselves up as objects of the ludicrous because they have assumed the identity of a mechanism.

Four stories establish the nature of the grotesque for the category: "The Man Who Was Used Up" (1843), "Loss of Breath" (1832), "The Devil in the Belfry" (1839), and "The Business Man" (1840). Closely related to them is "Maelzel's Chess-Player" (1836), a work, however, which is an essay rather than fiction. Here Poe attempts to establish the fraudulence of a machine reputed to operate with the complexity of the human mind. More will be said about this work in the conclusion to the chapter. The stories of the category may seem to have little to do with each other, as compared to the stories of the preceding category, since the motif of the mechanical man is presented both literally and metaphorically. As a consequence the image of man as mechanism may not seem to be rendered as graphically as the man-animal image of the last chapter. Another and more fundamental reason has to do with the artistic value of the

fiction itself which contains little in the way of effective plots: the stories lack the craft of Poe at his best. Yet as one reads along, the points of contact between one story and another become apparent and the image of man as mechanism becomes clear. The first story of the group, "The Man Who Was Used Up," crystallizes the nature of the grotesque. It depicts a general who has been almost completely mutilated in one of his campaigns. Anatomically, he has been reduced to a mere stump, but his missing parts have been replaced by those that are man made. "Loss of Breath" is a metaphorical companion-piece. Poe whimsically involves the protagonist in a hunt for his breath which is treated as though it were a tangible, as well as viable, part of the human anatomy, a thing capable of being taken out or put back at will. Again man takes on the character of an automaton, but Poe expands the idea of automatism here to include members of society as well. "The Devil in the Belfry" proceeds along the same lines as the first two stories, but in this instance we have no central figure. The members of a village community serve the function of protagonist, appearing to the reader as mechanisms as they follow a strict adherence to system and routine. The last story of the category, "The Business Man," is a companion-piece to "The Devil in the Belfry." In this case the reduction of man to mechanism is the result of his "positive appetite for system and regularity," thematically, almost another version of the latter story.

The narrator in "The Man Who Was Used Up" is, in part, a satire on his gothic prototype: "I am constitutionally nervous," he says, "--this, with me, is a family failing, and I can't help it. In especial, the slightest appearance of mystery--of any point I cannot exactly comprehend--puts me at once into a pitiable state of agitation" (p. 405). Thus the narrator is easily distressed when he cannot fathom the mystery surrounding "that truly fine-looking fellow," Brevet Brigadier-General John A. B. C. Smith, a man who, in contrast to himself, exudes enormous self confidence and general optimism, especially about the future of science:

"There is nothing at all like it," he would say; "we are a wonderful people, and live in a wonderful age. Parachutes and railroads--man-traps and spring guns! Our steam-boats are upon every sea, and the Nassau balloon packet is about to run regular trips . . . between London and Timbuctoo. And who shall calculate the immense influence upon social life--upon arts--upon commerce--upon literature--which will be the immediate result of the great principles of electro-magnetics! Nor, is this all let me assure you! There is really no end to the march of invention. The most wonderful--the most ingenious--and let me add . . . the most truly useful--mechanical contrivances are daily springing up like mushrooms. . . ." (p. 407)

The narrator's ignorance about Smith suggests that he is sufficiently cut off from Smith's social circles to supply the reader with a moral norm. That he does not know what everyone else knows--that Smith is more of a mechanical man than he is an organic human being--is a mark of his innocence. The first three initials of Smith's name, A. B. C.,

are themselves a clue to his simplistic, mechanical identity. The narrator's actual discovery, however, is tantamount to a moral revelation as much as it is merely an emotional shock. He refuses to accept as commonplace the creation of a Frankenstein in Smith and, indirectly, science itself as grotesque, the agency of Smith's mechanical rebirth.

There are many suggestions that Smith is a grotesque early in the story, but the knowledge of Smith's condition is kept hidden from the narrator until the conclusion. The narrator waxes rhapsodic over Smith's physical appearance, and catalogues each virtue of the man's anatomy, just as Morella's husband reduces Morella's beauty to a set of perfect teeth:

Upon this topic--the topic of Smith's personal appearance--I have a kind of melancholy satisfaction in being minute. His head of hair would have done honor to a Brutus; nothing could be more richly flowing, or possess a brighter gloss. It was of a jetty black; which was also the color, or more properly the no color, of his unimaginable whiskers. You perceive I cannot speak of these latter without enthusiasm; it is not too much to say that they were the handsomest pair of whiskers under the sun. At all events, they encircled, and at times partially overshadowed, a mouth utterly unequalled. Here were the most entirely even, and the most brilliantly white of all conceivable teeth. From between them, upon every proper, issued a voice of surpassing clearness, melody, and strength. In the manner of eyes, also, my acquaintance was pre-eminently endowed. . . . (p. 405)

Even the narrator's terminology shifts from general references to the human body to the use of precise anatomical terms: "Every connoisseur in such matters admitted the legs

to be good. There was neither too much flesh nor too little,--neither rudeness nor fragility. I could not imagine a more graceful curve than that of the os femoris, and there was just that due gentle prominence in the rear of the fibula which goes to the conformation of a properly proportioned calf" (p. 406).

Although Smith as mechanical man is the central focus for the grotesque in the story, he is not the only illustration Poe uses. Smith is the dramatic center of a society that is also dehumanized. Mooney refers to him as a "nineteenth century wastelander, or Hollow Man, with whom history has not caught up, still capable of making the gestures of significant life and observing the rituals of the old institutions, but doing it out of habit and by artificial means."<sup>6</sup> In addition, the people who constitute his world, although not literal mechanisms, reflect a certain amount of automatism in their language and attitudes:

"Smith!" said she, in reply to my very earnest inquiry; 'Smith!--why, not General A. B. C.? Bless me, I thought you knew all about him! This is a wonderfully inventive age! Horrid affair that!--a bloody set of wretches, those Kickapoos!--fought like a hero--prodigies of valor--immortal renown. Smith!--Brevet-Brigadier-General John A. B. C.!--why, you know he's the man--' (p. 408)

.....  
 "Smith!" said she, "Why, not General John A. B. C.? Horrid affair that, wasn't it?--great wretches, those Bugaboos--savages and so on--but we live in a wonderfully inventive age! Smith!--o yes! great man! perfect desperado!--immortal renown! prodigies of valor! Never heard! This was given in a scream. "Bless my soul!--why he's the man--" (p. 409)  
 .....

"Smith!" said Mrs. P., as we twirled about together in a pas de zephyr, 'Smith!--why, not General John A. B. C.? Dreadful business that of the Bugaboos, wasn't it? --dreadful creatures, those Indians!--do turn out your toes! I really am ashamed of you--man of great courage, poor fellow!--but this is a wonderful age of invention--O dear me, I'm out of breath--quite a desperado--prodigies of valor--never heard!--can't believe it--I shall have to sit down and enlighten you--Smith! Why he's the man--" (p. 410)

The excerpts I have used are merely illustrative, for the narrator goes on to other acquaintances of Smith to establish his true identity and receives similar responses of adulation, formulated, mechanical social gestures. Communication between the narrator and Smith breaks down, however, at the point at which the truth is to be gleaned. Only in an actual confrontation with Smith, at his home, does the narrator discover that the truth is grotesque. As he enters Smith's apartment the narrator kicks aside ". . . an exceedingly odd looking bundle of something" (p. 411). The bundle turns out to be Smith who has been reduced to an organic curiosity. But Smith, as usual, is in cheerful spirits and in the process of assuming his human identity:

"And a bloody action it was," continued the thing, as if in a soliloquy; "but then one mustn't fight with the Bugaboos and Kickapoos, and think of coming off with a mere scratch. Pompey, I'll thank you now for that arm. Thomas" [turning to me] "is decidedly the best hand at a cork leg; but if you should ever want an arm, my dear fellow, you must really let me recommend you to Bishop." Here Pompey screwed on an arm.

"We had rather hot work of it, that you may say. Now, you dog, slip on my shoulders and bosom. Pettit makes the best shoulders, but for a bosom you will have to go to Ducrow!" (p. 411)

And Smith's human identity appears to be nothing more than a mechanical disguise. The humanist ideal that science at its best had stood for becomes instead an inspiration for what is grotesque. Science is reduced to a mere craft which creates arms, legs, eyes, and a voice for a man who has lost the human equivalents and who takes pleasure in the artificial and the mechanical. Smith, then, along with his admirers, evokes our sense of the grotesque.

The objects of Poe's satire are not always so clearly in focus as they are in "The Man Who Was Used Up," even though Poe may declare his intent. In a response to a letter written by John P. Kennedy, touching on what Kennedy refers to as the serio-tragic-comic vein,--Kennedy urged Poe to write in this vein--Poe indicated what he thought his humorous tales were: "You are nearly--but not altogether right in relation to the satire of some of my tales. Most of them were intended for half banter, half satire--although I might not have fully acknowledged this to be their own end myself. 'Lionizing' and 'Loss of Breath' were satires properly speaking--at least so meant--the one of the rage for lions, and the facility of becoming one--the other of the extravagancies of Blackwood" (Works, XVII 30). Although "Loss of Breath" is ostensibly a satire on Blackwood, specifically on hackneyed literary techniques, the tale ranges over a series of topics that have satiric significance outside the magazine itself: the debasement of acting, ludicrous excesses in the medical



profession, the emptiness of human conversation. The satire begins, however, in the creation of a character who exists as a soulless mechanism and then ranges over representative social types.

The fundamental difference between "The Man Who Was Used Up" and "Loss of Breath" lies in the latter's use of a hackneyed metaphor to convey the notion of mechanism: "The phrases 'I am out of breath,' 'I have lost my breath,' etc., are often enough repeated in common conversation," comments the narrator; "but it had never occurred to me that the terrible accident of which I speak could bona fide and actually happen!" (p. 395). Breath, often connected with the soul, and an intangible part of being, is treated as though it were a mere mechanism. Upon its removal the protagonist moves throughout the story in a series of picaresque adventures; he is continually animated in his conversation, superficially clever, moving from one episode to another like a broken mechanism out of control, often treated by those he encounters as a thing. Thus the satire establishes him, and those who associate with him, as mindless, dehumanized, hollow.

At the outset of the story, the narrator finds that he is unable to use his breath as the basis of oral communication, and he is forced to find another means for producing speech: "I, at that interesting crisis, dropped my voice to a singularly deep guttural, I might still have continued to

her [his wife] the communication of my sentiments; this pitch of voice (the guttural) depending, I find, not upon the current of the breath, but upon a certain spasmodic action of the muscles of the throat" (p. 396). As the protagonist continues to search for his breath, Poe engages in a moment of literary self-satire: "Long and earnestly did I continue the investigation: but the contemptible reward of my industry and perseverance proved to be only a set of false teeth, two pairs of hips, an eye . . ." (p. 397). But the moment passes and the satire is next levelled at the acting profession. Informing his wife that he has become an actor, as an excuse for leaving the country, the protagonist practices his newly adopted art: "It is not now to be supposed, however, that in the delivery of such passages I was found at all deficient in the looking asquint--the showing of my teeth--the working of my knees--the shuffling my feet--or in any of those unmentionable graces which are now justly considered the characteristics of a popular performer" (p. 397). The newly adopted vocation of the narrator is represented as debased; the techniques of acting, like those of writing for Blackwood, are artificial, wooden, mechanical poses--the gestures of a harlequin.

While on his journey, the narrator undergoes another misfortune. Having been rendered immobile by two men of huge proportions, sitting on either side of him in a coach, the narrator is thrown out of the coach by the passengers

who assume they have been sitting with a corpse. He is then picked up by the landlord of a tavern who places him in the care of an apothecary. Once again regarded as a thing, merely an anatomical structure, the narrator is experimented on by the man of science: "The purchaser took me to his apartments and commenced operations immediately. Having cut off my ears, however, he discovered signs of animation. He now rang the bell, and sent for a neighboring apothecary with whom to consult in the emergency. In case of his suspicions with regard to my existence proving ultimately correct, he, in the meantime, made an incision in my stomach, and removed several of my viscera for private dissection" (pp. 398-399). Although the protagonist kicks and makes contortions to prove that he is alive, "All, however, was attributed to the effects of a new galvanic battery, where-with the apothecary, who is really a man of information, performed several curious experiments . . ." (p. 399). Through making mutilation and physical violence a commonplace, Poe continually reinforces the notion of man as a soulless anatomical object; but he, of course, works within the conventions of comedy--of farce--and his protagonist never dies. He simply continues to be treated as though he were really not a living personality to begin with. The next episode in the tale is another prime illustration. Having been mistaken for a criminal on his way to the gallows, the protagonist is hanged to the amusement of the crowd:

"My convulsions were said to be extraordinary. My spasms it would have been difficult to beat" (p. 400). From Poe's satiric perspective, the protagonist is not really alive, merely an empty vessel: "My body was, but I had no breath to be . . ." (p. 400).

The story reaches a comic tour de force in a charnel house scene in which the protagonist, aptly called Mr. Lackobreath, meets another human grotesque, a Mr. Windenough. As his signature suggests, the man is the repository of enormous wind which drives his continually animated and discordant voice in an endless flow of words:

" . . . Interruptions are annoying and should undoubtedly be abolished--don't you think so?--no reply, I beg you,--one person is enough to be speaking at a time.--I shall be done by and by, and then you may begin.--How the devil, sir, did you get into this place?--not a word I beseech you--been here some time myself--terrible accident!--heard of it, I suppose? awful calamity!--walking under your windows--some short while ago--about the time you were stage-struck--horrible occurrence!--heard of 'catching one's breath,' eh?--hold your tongue I tell you!--I caught somebody else's! had always too much of my own--met Blab at the corner of the street--wouldn't give me a chance for a word--couldn't get in a syllable edge-ways--attacked, consequently, with epilepsy--Blab made his escape--damn all fools!--they took me up for dead, and put me in this place--pretty doings all of them!--heard all you said about me--every word a lie--horrible!--wonderful!--outrageous!--hideous!--incomprehensible!--et cetera--et cetera--et cetera--et cetera--" (p. 402)

After Windenough lends Lackobreath the necessary wind for using his voice, the united strength of their cries brings their rescue, which leads to Poe's last satiric object--newspapers. The Whig editor, Scissors, publishes a treatise

on subterranean noises, provoking a debate that is in itself formulatic and mechanical: "A reply--rejoinder--confutation--and justification--followed in the columns of a Democratic gazette" (p. 404).

Unlike Swift Poe suggests no alternative to man's departure from his humanity. There is no Captain Pedro to supply the reader with a positive human standard. (The narrator of "The Man Who Was Used Up," through his innocence of the grotesque, and his negative response to it, might possibly be considered Poe's moral norm.) Poe seems to be concerned with impressing upon the reader the ability of his imagination to find variations on the theme of mechanism as it permeates human life and society.

In "The Devil in the Belfry" Poe's representation of man as mechanism is centered in the mythical community of Vondervotteimittiss rather than in free-wheeling attacks on a series of social types or professions. From the point of view of the inhabitants, the community is Utopia; they are content with things as they are and consider happiness outside of their social arrangement an impossibility. As is the case in all satire, the comic protagonist--here the community collectively--fails to realize its faults and is therefore blind to the fact that it is grotesque, more puppet than human. The citizens have become almost the physical embodiment of values which they have embraced at some remote point in their past: self-approval, practicality, uniformity,

and clock-like regularity. (Perhaps the closest point of contact of the community is with Swift's flying Island of Laputa, Book IV of Gulliver's Travels, where the inhabitants' obsession, in this case science, also leaves its impress on human life.) The spokesmen for Vondervotteimittis, the town council, put their power of authority behind the status quo when it declares

"That it is wrong to alter the good old course of things:"

"That there is nothing tolerable out of Vondervotteimittis:" and--

"That we will stick by our clocks and cabbages." (p. 739)

The result is that in dress, food, and pipe-smoking each member of the community is a duplicate of the other. In the world of mechanisms, individual identity is lost. Even the houses, along with the carvings on the wood-work, are identical, contributing to the uniformity of the psychic life:

Every house has a small garden before it, with a circular path, a sun-dial, and twenty-four cabbages. The buildings themselves are so precisely alike, that one can in no manner be distinguished from the other. . . . The wood-work, throughout, is of a dark hue, and there is much carving about it, with but a trifling variety of pattern; for, time out of mind, the carvers of Vondervotteimittis have never been able to carve more than two objects--a timepiece and a cabbage. But these they do exceedingly well, and intersperse them, with singular ingenuity, wherever they find room for the chisel.

The dwellings are as much alike inside as out, and the furniture is all upon one plan. The floors are of square tiles, the chairs and tables of black-looking wood with thin crooked legs and puppy feet. The mantel pieces are wide and high, and have not only timepieces and cabbages sculptured over the front, but a real timepiece, again, is a little

China man having a large stomach with a great round hole in it, through which is seen the dial-plate of a watch. (p. 737)

What serves for the religious experience in Vondervotteimittiss is universal homage to a clock. Mechanism itself becomes the object of adulation. (Poe in "Maelzel's Chess-Player" indirectly illustrates that the love of mechanism is a contemporary reality rather than a literary fantasy.)

The great clock has seven faces--one in each of the seven sides of the steeple--so that it can be readily seen from all quarters. . . . There is a belfry-man whose sole duty is to attend to it; but this duty is the most perfect of sinecures--for the clock of Vondervotteimittis was never yet known to have anything the matter with. Until lately, the bare supposition of such a thing was considered heretical. From the remotest period of antiquity to which the archives have reference, the hours have regularly been struck by the big bell. And, indeed, the case was just the same with all the other clocks and watches in the borough. Never was such a place for keeping the true time. When the large clapper thought proper to say "Twelve o'clock!" all its obedient followers opened their throats simultaneously, and responded like a very echo. (p. 739)

If the humor of the story exists, as Bergson suggests, when man has become as fixed and rigid as a machine, but still continues to resemble a living personality, then it is increased even more when man begins to resemble a mechanism that is broken. Poe brings the story to its comic climax when the order of the mechanical men of Vondervotteimittis gives way to chaos. The inhabitants of this community have become extensions of their clock, the master mechanism controlling their lives. When a mysterious stranger enters the village, assaults the belfry-man, and damages the clock

so that it strikes thirteen, the citizens in turn reflect its disordered state, and the disorder extends into every phase of their lives:

"Der Teufel!" gasped the little old gentlemen, turning pale, dropping their pipes, and putting down all their right legs from over their left knees.

"Der Teufel!" groaned they, "Dirteen! Dirteen!-- Mein Gott, it is Dirteen o'clock!!"

Why attempt to describe the terrible scene which ensued? All Vondervotteimittis flew at once into a lamentable state of uproar.

"Vot is cum'd to mein pelly?" roared all the boys, --"I've been ongrly for dis hour!"

"Vot is cum'd to mein kraut?" screamed all the vrows, "It has been done to rags for dis hour!"

"Vot is cum'd to mein pipe?" swore all the little old gentlemen, "Donder and Blitzen! it has been smoked out for dis hour!"--and they filled them up again in a great rage, and, sinking back in their arm-chairs, puffed away so fast and so fiercely that the whole valley was immediately filled with impenetrable smoke.

Meantime the cabbages all turned very red in the face, and it seemed as if old Nick himself had taken possession of every thing in the shape of a timepiece. The clocks carved upon the furniture took to dancing as if bewitched, while those upon the mantel-pieces could scarcely contain themselves for fury, and kept such a continual striking of thirteen, and such a frisking and wriggling of their pendulums as was really horrible to see. But, worse than all, neither the cats nor the pigs could put up any longer with the behavior of the little repeaters tied to their tails, and resented it by scampering all over the place, scratching and poking, and squeaking and screeching, and caterwauling and squalling, and flying into the faces, and running under the petticoats of the people, and creating altogether the most abominable din and confusion which it is possible for a reasonable person to conceive. (pp. 741-742)

In a sense, the ending of the story is the point at which "Loss of Breath" begins; in both instances a mechanism goes berserk.

As noted earlier, although Poe represents man's relation to mechanism as a form of dehumanization, he does



not necessarily suggest an alternative to the condition within the fiction. The narrator, easily an ironic persona for Poe, wears the mask of cynicism and allies himself with the community: "Affairs being thus miserably situated, I left the place in disgust, and now appeal for aid to all lovers of correct time and fine kraut. Let us proceed in a body to the borough, and restore the ancient order of things in Vondervotteimittiss by ejecting that little fellow from the steeple" (p. 742). We need not take the devil, however, as in any way providing an answer to the life of mechanism: ". . . While he cut a fandango here, and a whirligig there [he] did not seem to have the remotest idea in the world of such a thing as keeping time in his steps." (p. 740). Poe's devil is not, from any conceivable romantic vantage point, Milton's Lucifer or, for that matter, Twain's Phillip Traum, a symbol of individual self assertion in the former and of creativity in the latter. If anything, Poe's devil resembles the vice of the morality play, and Poe presents similar comic figures in "The Imp of the Perverse," "The Angel of the Odd," "The Duc De L'Omelette," and "Never Bet the Devil Your Head." All of them are symbols of capriciousness and demonic irresponsibility. Nevertheless as mythical and whimsical as Vondervotteimittiss may seem to be, it is no less a representation of nineteenth century American village communities as those depicted in Thoreau's Walden, in his chapter on "Economy."

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine.<sup>7</sup>

Poe was not at heart, or in practice, a social reformer. He was decidedly against such utopian schemes as the Brook Farm experiment and called the participants "Hopfrogians," but he certainly did not refrain from attacking what was dehumanizing and debasing. What is patent is that Poe recognized social evil, and satirized it, while at the same time avoiding the systems of remedy put forth by a few American transcendentalists whom he no doubt regarded as system makers.

Poe's satire in "The Business Man" is not only directed to charlatanism methodized but also to the nineteenth century science of phrenology whose theory of human behavior tended to reduce man to a mechanism. In 1836 Poe published an essay in the Southern Literary Messenger praising the potential good that the science held for man:

In regard to the uses of Phrenology--its most direct, and, perhaps, most salutary, is that of self-examination and self-knowledge. It is contended that, with proper caution, and well-directed inquiry, individuals may obtain, through the science, a perfectly accurate estimate of their own moral capabilities--and, thus instructed, will be the better fitted for decision in regard to a choice of offices and duties in life. But there are other and scarcely less important uses too numerous to mention--at least here. (Works, VIII, 253)

"The Business Man" was published in 1840 in Burton's Magazine under the title "Peter-Pendulum, The Business Man." It is not necessary to assume that Poe changed his public position on phrenology, a well received science of the day. Nevertheless the "philosophical lynxeye"<sup>8</sup> of his satire examines phrenology from a less attractive angle than Poe furnishes in his essay. The entire life activity of the protagonist is presented as nothing more than the expression of a bump on his head, and from the point of view of the satire, he too appears as a broken mechanism. His disorder is also expressed in his inversion of the commonplace and the outre. Thus his phrenological accident shapes his destiny:

My notions . . . might not have been so clear as they are, but for a fortunate accident which happened to me when I was a very little boy. A good-hearted old Irish nurse (whom I shall not forget in my will) took me up one day by the heels, when I was making more noise than was necessary, and swinging me round two or three times, d\_\_\_\_\_d my eyes for "a skreeking little spalpeen," and then knocked my head into a cocked hat against the bedpost. This, I say, decided my fate, and made my fortune. A bump arose at once on my sinciput, and turned out to be as pretty an organ of order as one shall see on a summer's day. Hence that positive appetite for system and regularity which has made me the distinguished man of business that I am. (p. 413)

Peter Proffit, like other Poe protagonists, is dehumanized. His only identity is that of his vocation, confidence man. He asserts that such traditionally normal occupations as lawyer, physician, or soap-boiler are fly-by-night and eccentric ". . . entirely at variance with the fitness of things, and having no business whatever to be

considered as business at all" (p. 413). Anyone who enters any one of these pursuits ". . . pretending to be a lawyer, or a blacksmith, or a physician--anything out of the usual way--you may set him down at once as a genius, and then, according to the rule-of-three, he's an ass" (p. 413). Conversely the protagonist himself engages in such marginal business activities, some of them illegal, as Tailor's Walking Advertisement, the Eye-Sore line, Organ-Grinding, or the Shampost,<sup>9</sup> to name just a few; all of them, however, are pursued with method, the key word in his vocabulary which converts him into a mechanism:

I was able to discharge the onerous duties of this profession [Tailor's Walking-Advertisement line], only by that rigid adherence to system which formed the leading feature of my mind. A scrupulous method characterized my actions as well as my accounts. In my case, it was method--not money--which made the man--at least all of him that was not made by the tailor whom I served. At nine, every morning, I called upon that individual for the clothes of the day. Ten o'clock found me in some fashionable promenade or other place of public amusement. The precise regularity with which I turned my handsome person about, so as to bring successively into view every portion of the suit upon my back, was the admiration of all the knowing men in the trade. (pp. 414-415)

The career of Peter Profitt is a nightmare inversion of the American values of industry and enterprise, and his grotesqueness, his correspondence to a mechanism, is accentuated rhetorically at the beginning of the narrative: "I am a business man. I am a methodical man. Method is the thing, after all" (p. 413). The city, as well as the village, lends itself to the creation of human grotesques.

Poe did not treat mechanism exclusively as subject and theme of his fiction. In 1836 he published an expose in the Southern Literary Messenger of a purely mechanical device which had been invented by Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen but taken over by J. N. Maelzel who exhibited it throughout the United States. Maelzel's chess player was advertised as a pure automaton that could conduct a game of chess without the aid of human agency. Wimsatt in an article entitled, "Poe and the Chess Automaton,"<sup>10</sup> asserts that the solution to the mechanical chess player had already been suggested before April, 1836, and he concludes that the majority of the public did not want to believe in the fraudulence of the machine. Poe gives Wimsatt support for his position in his own essay on the chess player: "The most general opinion in relation to it, an opinion not too unfrequently adopted by men who should have known better, was as we have before said, that no immediate human agency was employed--in other words, that the machine was purely a machine and nothing else" (p. 428). Poe's essay is interesting and significant not only because it foreshadows the method he follows in the detective stories but also for its revelations on the modern sensibility. Suggested in the essay is the admiration of the public for precision and accuracy. (The machine, however, does not always win its games.) The public refused to

believe that the machine was a hoax until Poe published his point-by-point debunking. The widespread acceptance of the machine as a pure automaton is once again testimony to what nineteenth century philosophers and twentieth century sociologists have recognized: that the machine had become a sort of sacred cow. Thus the category mirrors the values that man derives from mechanism--order, regularity, method, and to the extent that he accepts these values, his humanity is vitiated and he becomes a puppet. Poe's literary grotesque, at least for the stories in this group is not far removed from a recognizable social reality. At the end of the essay on the chess player, Poe concludes that a man operates the mechanism from the interior. The collaboration and interdependence of man and mechanism--the situation is starkly reminiscent of "The Man Who Was Used Up"--suggests that the violation of realms is grotesque fact as well as fiction. Thus the sense of the grotesque that Poe furnishes is not an independent creation of a self-contained imagination.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Henri Bergson, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York, 1928), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Leo Marx's The Machine in the Garden (New York, 1964), p. 169.

<sup>4</sup>Mooney, p. 226.

<sup>5</sup>Bergson, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup>Stephen L. Mooney, "The Comic in Poe's Fiction," American Literature, XXXIII (1962), 438.

<sup>7</sup>Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Civil Disobedience, ed. Sherman Paul (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup>Works, XVI, 161. "It is only the philosophical lynxeye," Poe remarks, "that, through the indignity-mist of Man's life, can still discern the dignity of Man." In a sense, the satirist is a kind of philosopher who, by indirection, tries to bring man back to a sense of human values and human dignity.

<sup>9</sup>The Eye-Sore trade, Organ-grinding, and the Sham-Post business illustrate the type of shady activities

entered into by the protagonist. The Eye-Sore trade involves the putting up of an "ornamental mud hovel" next to a respectable building. The protagonist has the eye sore taken down only after he has been paid an exorbitant sum of money. In Organ-grinding, he is paid to leave the premises where he practices his profession since his performance annoys rather than pleases. In the Sham-Post business, another confidence game, he forges letters, delivers them, and collects on the postage due.

<sup>10</sup>W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., "Poe and the Chess Automaton," American Literature, XI (May, 1939), 138-151.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE ALCHEMISTS

The alchemists thought of themselves as good Christians, but they were like many moderns in preferring to seek knowledge through their own experiences. . . .<sup>1</sup>

It is not man who is in need of redemption, but matter, in which the divine soul is imprisoned in a sleeping and confined condition. Matter, which contains the divine mystery, is everywhere, and also in the human body. It is easily had, and is found everywhere--even in the most horrible filth.<sup>2</sup>

The title of this chapter, "The Alchemists," is meant to supply a suggestive metaphor to describe the relation of the scientist to his object of study. The scientist, as the title suggests, is the practitioner of an imperfect art. Mesmerism or galvanism, whatever the case may be, is in Poe's context merely another form of alchemy. "Alchemy," we are told, "became the handmaiden of charlatanry and was to remain so for three hundred years until late in the eighteenth century the terminology of the quack and much of his mummary as well revealed his heavy borrowings from the alchemist's language and practices. Through the propositions of the quack, moreover, ran the same leitmotiv that pervaded alchemy: that was transmutation."<sup>3</sup> Like the

alchemist, Poe's scientist engages in experiments that involve a similar process: he attempts to conquer the barriers of time, space, and matter, using a live subject in what is essentially a trial and error experiment. For the patient the result turns out to be trial by error. For all his denigration of science in "Sonnet--To Science," or in other pejorative references, Poe himself is fascinated with the scientific mind and with the unanswered questions science attempts to find answers to. Eureka is the most revealing index to Poe's own scientific speculations, but this is only to say that Poe was a thoughtful man of his age.

The stories in the category plainly demonstrate that Poe was both fascinated and repulsed by the exploits of his scientists. Poe's fiction reveals once again that the origins of the grotesque have their bases in the contemporary world; his fiction mirrors the attempt of the alchemist to create gold from base matter, the attempt of the mesmerist to transfer man from one state of being to another, or the attempt of the galvanist to bring man from death to life. In all but one story the practitioners of the new alchemy are ludicrous and their results are grotesque. Poe's scientist, like Hawthorne's Rappaccini or Mary Shelley's Baron Von Frankenstein, is a man with a ruling obsession, indifferent to human or moral consequences; the secondary image Poe furnishes is that of a charlatan or buffoon. In

either case, the scientist refuses to accept the categories of life as they are. In his desire for knowledge of life and death, he sets for himself the task of investigating men who are on the point of death, objects that are already dead, or men with transcendental sensibilities. "The imperfect state," comments Jung, "is like the state of sleep; bodies lie in it like 'the sleepers chained in Hades,' and they are awaked as from death to a new and more beautiful life by the divine tincture extracted from the spirit filled stone."<sup>4</sup> The life that the Poe scientist tries to resurrect falls far short of beauty. Just as Ligelia's husband wills her back to life, so does the scientist return his patient from death to life, and the patient brings with him physically, and metaphysically, evidences of death. The scientist's yearning for his version of the sublime generates once again the aesthetics of the grotesque.

It is perhaps a commonplace of criticism to say that the art of Poe is an art of recapitulation; Poe's stories and poems continually reformulate and restate a handful of themes and motifs. The generalization may be equally true for other writers, but it seems to have a great deal more significance in Poe's case. I might add, in fact, that it seems to be a significant clue to a mind and art ostensibly so full of contradiction.

The stories of the marriage group, and those under consideration in this chapter, offer a striking example of

Poe's reformulations. The latter were all written in the neighborhood of six years after the former, yet they continue to reflect a preoccupation that never left Poe, although they are based on an entirely new subject matter: the patient as scientific experiment. If, for instance, the Faustian protagonist uses woman as a way to beauty and transcendental truths, the scientist--whether he be mesmerist or galvanist--operates in similar fashion: he arrives at psychical and scientific truths through employing another human being as part of an experiment. Poe, however, provides a fairly consistent point of view towards his Faust figure; the husband, almost without exception, suffers a form of punishment through an encounter with the grotesque, but the evocation of the grotesque in the stories of this category varies in intensity from story to story. Moral indictment through the uses of the grotesque is never as categorical as it is in the stories of the marriage group. Poe moves in a generic arc that takes him from a gothicized science fiction through farce. By contrast, the stories dealt with in the first chapter fall strictly within the gothic mode. Poe's generic variety, both in the category at large, as well as within each story, suggests a shifting authorial attitude, a somewhat uncertain point of view toward his materials. Despite what appears to be an ambivalence in attitude towards the subject matter, the emphasis in the fiction seems to be directed to an indictment of the scientist and a repudiation of his art.

Thus the extent to which the scientist serves as an agency of the grotesque exists on a sliding scale of intensity and depends upon the generic qualities Poe invests in each story. Poe's ability to retreat from one vantage point to another may easily be considered a mark of intellectual shallowness. This conclusion cannot easily be brushed aside, but an evaluation of it will be reserved for a more appropriate place in this study.

The stories belonging to the category are "Von Kempelen and His Discovery" (1849), "Mesmeric Revelations" (1844), "The Case of Mr. Valdemar" (1845), "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" (1844), and "Some Words with a Mummy" (1845). The latest story of the group is literally about an alchemist, or a would-be alchemist, who has been able to produce pure gold from base metal. Yet his success is not honestly come by. The story, however, has more to do with the figure of Von Kempelen rather than with the matter of the grotesque, as it is generally presented within the category. Basically, it is a study of two kinds of scientists: the man of responsibility as opposed to the charlatan, and the implications of the story offer the reader suggestive cues for the others in the category. It is the superficial man of science who, in addition to practicing an imperfect art, inevitably produces a version of the grotesque. "Mesmeric Revelations" is the only story in the group which

allows Poe's interests in life, death, and immortality to seize control over the fictional level for the purposes of a philosophical colloquy. The story supplies the only positive treatment of mesmerism in the category, elevating the grotesque to a place of prominence only at the end, as the fictive level is reestablished. In contrast to it is "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar." A mesmerist, anxious to put his art to the test with a person on the verge of death, finds a willing subject in his patient. Because of the mesmerist's failure to terminate the experiment at a proper time, his subject turns into "detestable putrescence" before his very eyes. "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains," like the preceding story, maintains a studied seriousness in its presentation of the grotesque. In this instance, a mesmerist who has established an unusually close bond with his patient, transmits materials to his patient's imagination, which evokes in him a sense of another man's past. Imaginatively, he is transported back in time and space. "Some Words with a Mummy" is a rather heavy satire. Basically, it is a comic version of "Mesmeric Revelations." In this case, a group of doctors, in a moment of levity, decide to apply a galvanic shock to the mummy and are amazed to find its life renewed. Like its philosophical counterpart, the story serves as a vehicle for an exposition, but this time the exposition is couched in satiric terms. Throughout the category two ideas are linked to the evocation

of the grotesque: the inability of the scientist to control the uncertain powers so dangerously in his command and the reduction of human life to the materials of a laboratory experiment.

"Von Kempelen and His Discovery" supplies a crucial metaphor for the entire category: the idea of alchemical transformation. The story itself, however, is only secondarily concerned with the processes of alchemy. Von Kempelen, the pseudo-scientist, is Poe's primary interest. Only through obtaining access to the experiments of another is Von Kempelen able to achieve the success of turning lead into gold; but Poe does not find men of science categorically evil. The theories of the alchemical process which Von Kempelen acquires originate with Sir Humphrey Davy, "an illustrious chemist [who] had not only conceived the idea in question, but had actually made no inconsiderable progress, experimentally, in the very identical analysis now so triumphantly brought to an issue by Von Kempelen" (p. 82). Davy, in contrast to Von Kempelen, and all other scientists in the stories of the category, is Poe's man of responsibility. For him the scientific pursuit is conditioned by a moral sensibility:

The fact is, Sir Humphrey Davy was about the last man in the world to commit himself on scientific topics. Not only had he a more than ordinary dislike to quackery, but he was morbidly afraid of appearing empirical; so that, however fully he might have been convinced that he was on the right track in the matter now in question, he would never have spoken out, until he had every thing ready for the most practical demonstration. I verily believe that his last moments

would have been rendered wretched, could he have suspected that his wishes in regard to burning this "Diary" (full of crude speculations) would have been unattended to. . . . (p. 83)

Von Kempelen's scientific pursuits are, on the other hand, motivated by egotism and self interest, those qualities found in every Poe protagonist who initiates the processes of the grotesque. Only in this particular story, however, is some qualification needed. Despite Von Kempelen's moral failings, the results of his efforts turn out to be sublime rather than grotesque; he is able to bring about the transmutation of lead into gold. Yet his success is a reflection of Davy's ideas rather than his skill in the art of alchemy; but Von Kempelen fails to enjoy the rewards. In the midst of an alchemical experiment, he is arrested for having usurped Davy's secret, and he destroys his work before it can be examined by the police. The secret of the alchemical process remains with Von Kempelen who refuses to share the sublime mineral with the rest of mankind. When only metals are at stake, the possibility for bringing about the grotesque is slight. In the other stories of the category, the "alchemical" experiment, although also aimed at obtaining things sublime, produces in its place the grotesque. The difference lies in the raw material--human beings.

Although a movement from one realm to another takes place, the effects of the grotesque are only minimally exploited in "Mesmeric Revelations." Like "The Colloquy of



Monos and Una" and "The Power of Words," "Mesmeric Revelations" is primarily a philosophical dialogue, but with the earth instead of the universe as setting. On the fictive level, the story involves a relationship between mesmerist and patient. Like all men of his art, the mesmerist has cultivated a moral and physical sympathy with his patient, Vankirk, and, at first, he uses his powers to furnish him relief from pain; but the nature of the relationship changes, and it is the patient rather than the mesmerist who wishes to use the art for other than therapeutic purposes. It is Vankirk who possesses a curiosity in the transcendental, in realms beyond the boundaries of normal experience, and he touches on one of Poe's favorite topics: the nature of the soul's immortality. The greater portion of the story deals with the matter in Socratic fashion. Before the story moves from the fictive to the philosophic level, the processes of the grotesque are introduced. The mesmerist transports his patient from the waking state into a mesmeric sleep, and the patient is projected to a realm beyond normal cognition. This netherworld usually exists in Poe as the geography of the grotesque, and it invariably causes the patient who stumbles into it fear, anxiety, and terror to the point of almost total human disorientation. The story, however, moves beyond the initial effects of the grotesque to produce for Vankirk knowledge of the sublime, a perspective that is completely transcendental.

Both the grotesque and the sublime elevate the emotions of the Poe protagonist, but the man who encounters the grotesque does not seek it out willingly; he comes upon it either through accident or supernatural design, confronted with the grotesque as a kind of punishment for his misuse of the sublime. Vankirk, like his transcendental counterpart, also endeavors to discover the sublime, but not at the expense of another person. His characterization evokes sympathy; he himself is on the verge of death, a condition usually reserved for Poe's women. In addition, he seems totally lacking in egotism, despite his speculative nature. He affirms the existence of those qualities in men--the soul and the intellect--usually out of proportion in the transcendentalist husband or in Poe's men of science and philosophy: "Here upon earth, at least, philosophy, I am persuaded, will always in vain call upon us to look upon qualities as things. The will may assent--the soul--the intellect, never" (p. 89). Poe obviously wanted to use Vankirk as his own philosophic voice, to discuss what in essence is Poe's own eschatology. The materials were later reworked into his summa theologica, Eureka. To accomplish this end, Poe presents Vankirk as a man who, more than most, is ready for an encounter with the sublime.

The dialogue between patient and narrator begins with a major question--what is the nature of God?--and the answer that the patient supplies is so astonishing and so

unique that it generates a sense of the sublime, a moment of intense illumination. At the same time the answer erases the traditional notions of Platonic and Christian philosophy with respect to the duality of spirit and matter: "That which is matter," remarks Vankirk, "is not at all--unless qualities are things" (p. 90). The remainder of the colloquy consists of an amplification and illustration of Vankirk's new knowledge, the essence of which is summed up in one paragraph:

He [God] is not spirit, for he exists. Nor is he matter, as you understand it. But there are gradations of matter of which man knows nothing; the grosser impelling the finer, the finer pervading the grosser. The atmosphere, for example, impels the electric principle, while the electric principle permeates the atmosphere. These gradations of matter increase in rarity or fineness, until we arrive at a matter unparticled--without particles--indivisible--one; and here the law of impulsion and permeation is modified. The ultimate or unparticled matter not only permeates all things, but impels all things, and thus is all things within itself. This matter is God. What men attempt to embody in the word "thought," is this matter in motion. (pp. 90-91)

The transformation of Vankirk from one state of being to another, instead of causing a loss of perspective, brings him a gain in perspective, an entirely new view of the nature of existence which receives greater elaboration in Eureka:

All these creatures--all--those which you term animate, as well as those to whom you deny life for no better reason than that you do not behold it in operation--all these creatures have, in a greater or less degree, a capacity for pleasure and for pain. . . . These creatures are all too, more or less conscious Intelligence; conscious first, of a proper identity; conscious, secondly and by faint

indeterminate glimpses, of an identity with the Divine Being of whom we speak--of an identity with God. Of the two classes of consciousness, fancy that the former will grow weaker, the latter stronger, during the long succession of ages which must elapse before these myriads of individual Intelligence become blended--when the bright stars become blended--into One. Think that the sense of individual identity will be gradually merged in the general consciousness--that Man, for example, ceasing imperceptibly to feel himself man, will at length attain that awfully triumphant epoch when he shall recognize his existence as that of Jehovah. In the meantime bear in mind that all is Life--Life--Life within the Life--the less within the greater, and all within the Spirit Divine. (Works, XVI, 314-315)

The ideas located in "Mesmeric Revelations," and enunciated on a larger scale in Eureka, point to the basic philosophic differences that exist between Poe's transcendentalism and the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. Poe does away with the traditional dualism subscribed to by Emerson and Thoreau; for him spirit and matter no longer exist in separate categories. Life consists only of matter. Such a view is remarkably similar to that of Whitman who, although he addresses himself to the body and the soul in "Song of Myself," eventually comes to place more emphasis on matter: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,/If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles." Thus Poe, as is also the case with Whitman, supports the notion of a divine interrelatedness; Poe simply brings it to its logical conclusion.

The narrator of the story, the mesmerist, does not come by transcendental knowledge directly; he receives it only through vicarious experience. In this respect he is as

helpless and as intellectually untutored as the husband of Morella, who also stands by passively as his wife communicates her transcendental erudition. Similarly, the mesmerist's encounter with the sublime is also balanced by an experience with the grotesque. When Vankirk's revelations are completed, the mesmerist tries to awaken him, but the patient expires before he journeys back to the realm of the mortal. "I noticed," remarks the mesmerist, "that in less than a minute afterwards his corpse had all the stern rigidity of stone. His brow was of the coldness of ice. Thus, ordinarily, should it have appeared, only after long pressure from Azrael's hand. Had the sleep-walker, indeed, during the latter portion of his discourse, been addressing me from the region of the shadows?" (p. 93). For the scientist the experience is ambiguously resolved. He cannot determine whether his uncertain art has mesmerized the still living patient to a point where divine illumination is possible or mesmerized only the soul which has used the dead body (Evidently physical death has taken place before Vankirk's soul finishes its account.) for purposes of communication. The recurrent Poe theme of life-in-death is once again introduced, but it receives greater elaboration in "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar."

In "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" the grotesque becomes a matter of public interest if not public horror, a rare situation in Poe's fiction:

. . . I shall not pretend to consider it any matter for wonder, that the extraordinary case of M. Valdemar has excited discussion. It would have been a miracle had it not--especially under the circumstances. Through the desire of all parties concerned, to keep the affair from the public, at least for the present, or until we had further opportunities for investigation--through our endeavors to effect this--a garbled or exaggerated account made its way into society, and became the source of many unpleasant misrepresentations; and, very naturally, of a great deal of disbelief. (p. 96)

The narrator-protagonist attempts to minimize the controversy surrounding these events, but in providing the facts he firmly establishes his own guilt as an agency of the grotesque. He informs the reader of his abiding interest in mesmerism and his desire to exert magnetic influence over a person on the verge of death. Fascinated with the idea of arresting death through his art, the narrator reveals an almost salacious interest in the feelings of his patient while the prolonged experiment is taking place. Valdemar, the patient, unlike Vankirk, has no interest in theosophical matters yet, as he has done so often in the past, he accedes to the wishes of the mesmerist and allows himself to undergo another experiment: "I spoke to him frankly," the narrator remarks, "upon the subject, and to my surprise, his interest seemed vividly excited. I say to my surprise; for, although he had always yielded his person freely to my experiment, he had never before given me any tokens of sympathy with what I did" (p. 97).

The experiment takes place at a stage in Valdemar's disease when the man is no more than an organism in decay:

The left lung had been for eighteen months in a semi-osseous or cartilaginous state, and was, of course, entirely useless for all purposes of vitality. The right, in its upper portion, was also partially, if not thoroughly, ossified, while the lower region was merely a mass of purulent tubercles, running one into another. Several extensive perforations existed; and, at one point, permanent adhesion to the ribs had taken place. These appearances in the right lobe were of comparatively recent date. The ossification had proceeded with very unusual rapidity; no sign of it had been discovered a month before, and the adhesion had only been observed during the three previous days. Independently of the phthisis, the patient was suspected of aneurism of the aorta. . . . It was the opinion of both physicians that M. Valdemar would die about midnight on the morrow (Sunday). (p. 98)

Despite the agonies of the patient's physical condition, the mesmerist keeps him in a state of suspended animation for seven months, continually addressing questions to Valdemar which elicit only one reply: "Yes;--asleep now. Do not wake me!--let me die so!" (p. 100). The experiment rather than the patient preempts the sympathies of the narrator who interests himself only in a clinical description of what takes place:

There was not the faintest sign of vitality in M. Valdemar; and concluding him to be dead, we were consigning him to the charge of the nurses, when a strong vibratory motion was observable in the tongue. This continued for perhaps a minute. At the expiration of this period, there issued from the distended and motionless jaws a voice--such as it would be madness in me to attempt describing. There are, indeed, two or three epithets which might be considered as applicable to it in part; I might say, for example, that the sound was harsh, and broken and hollow; but the hideous whole is indescribable, for the simple reason that no similar sounds have ever jarred upon the ear of humanity. (p. 101)

Having put his experiment into execution, the mesmerist also establishes the conditions for the evocation of the

grotesque. The patient is neither dead nor alive; he remains suspended between two worlds; he is capable of making audible sounds, but they are no longer those issuing from a recognizably human voice: "I have spoken both of 'sound' and of 'voice.' I mean to say that the sound was one of distinct--of even wonderfully, thrillingly distinct--syllabification. M. Valdemar spoke--obviously in reply to the question I had propounded to him a few minutes before" (p. 101). The reply supplied by the human experiment implicates everyone in the room in the judgment of the grotesque, a judgment conveyed through an encounter with the horrible:

"Yes;--no;--I have been sleeping--and now--now--I am dead." No person present even effected to deny, or attempted to repress, the unutterable, shuddering horror which these few words, thus uttered, were so well calculated to convey. Mr. L\_\_\_\_l (the student) swooned. The nurses immediately left the chamber, and could not be induced to return. My own impressions I would not pretend to render intelligible to the reader. For nearly an hour, we busied ourselves, silently--without the utterance of a word--in endeavors to revive Mr. L\_\_\_\_l. (p. 101)

In interfering with the normal processes of life and death, the narrator has arrested death and elevated it to a prominence beyond the normal. In Eureka, Poe speculates, that all life is matter, exists in various stages of composition, and is continually in the process of change. Poe's mesmerist suspends these normal processes of death and decay which Whitman takes for granted; but once they are reactivated, they move with a rapidity that can only appall: "As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of



'dead!' 'dead!' absolutely bursting from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once-- within the space of a single minute, or less, shrunk--crumbled--absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before the whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome--of detestable putrescence" (p. 103). Once death occurs man is usually buried; physical and chemical decomposition begin their work underground. In the case of Valdemar, an interval of nearly seven months elapses before the man, who is clinically dead, begins the processes of decay. Thus Valdemar becomes a symbol of life-in-death: animation expressed in a physical form that is all but chemically and physically exhausted. The ending of the story is strikingly reminiscent of "Ligeia." The mesmerist's encounter with the remains of Valdemar involves not only a horrible visual experience but also an indictment by the grotesque.

"A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" continues Poe's investigation of scientific irresponsibility as it relates to the conditions of the grotesque. (Significantly enough, the mesmerist in the story is a man called Templeton.) But before a causal relationship is established between the man of science and the usual limbo world of the grotesque, Poe heightens the mystery of the story by evoking a sense of the grotesque not immediately connected with the offices of the mesmerist. The narrator's description of the protagonist, Bedloe, leaves the reader troubled and uncertain about the

identity of the man. Bedloe fits no recognizable human category.

I found it impossible to comprehend him either in his moral or physical relations. Of his family I could obtain no satisfactory account. Whence he came, I never ascertained. Even about his age--although I call him a young gentleman--there was something which perplexed me in no little degree. He certainly seemed young--and he made a point of speaking about his youth--yet there were moments when I should have had little trouble in imagining him a hundred years of age. But in no regard was he more peculiar than in his personal appearance. He was singularly tall and thin. He stooped much. His limbs were exceedingly long and emaciated. His forehead was broad and low. His complexion was absolutely bloodless. His mouth was large and flexible, and his teeth were more wildly uneven, although sound, than I had ever before seen teeth in a human head. The expression of his smile, however, was by no means unpleasing, as might be supposed; but it had no variation whatever. It was one of profound melancholy--of a phaseless and unceasing gloom. His eyes were abnormally large, and round like those of a cat. The pupils, too, upon any accession or diminuation of light, underwent contraction or dilation, just such as it is observed in the feline tribe. In moments of excitement the orbs grew bright to a degree almost inconceivable; seeming to emit luminous rays, not of a reflected but of an intrinsic lustre, as does a candle or the sun; yet their ordinary condition was so totally rapid, filmy, and dull, as to convey the idea of the eyes of a long-interred corpse. (p. 679)

The man appears both young and old; his description hints at something animal about him. Bedloe, however, is able to explain the peculiarities of his person by attributing them to a long series of neuralgic attacks. The introductory material, although it evokes a typical Poe atmosphere, has only a remote significance to the Templeton-Bedloe relationship which forms the essential basis for the grotesque in the story.

Like his counterparts in the category, Templeton has become a convert to mesmerism and has succeeded in alleviating the acute neuralgic pains of his patient. The mesmerist, however, permits his scientific curiosity to surpass his humane calling, his role as "healer," and he induces Bedloe to submit to a number of experiments that have nothing to do with the alleviation of pain: "The Doctor, however, like all enthusiasts, had struggled hard to make a thorough convert of his pupil, and finally so far gained his point as to induce the sufferer to submit to numerous experiments" (p. 680). Templeton finally reaches a point when he is in complete control of the mind of his patient; and he has been able to achieve mastery over Bedloe because of the man's innate transcendental disposition: "His imagination was singularly vigorous and creative; and no doubt it derived additional force from the habitual use of morphine, which he swallowed in great quantity, and without which he would have found it impossible to exist" (p. 680). Bedloe, if not a willing subject, is evidently an easy victim to the power of suggestion. After the twelfth experiment the narrator observes: ". . . the will of the patient succumbed rapidly to that of the physician, so that, when I first became acquainted with the two, sleep was brought about almost instantaneously by the mere volition of the operator, even when the invalid was unaware of his presence" (p. 680). The narrator, however, does not regard the mesmerist's power as

especially disturbing: "It is only now, in the year 1845, when similar miracles are witnessed daily by thousands, that I dare venture to record this apparent impossibility as a matter of serious fact" (p. 680). The remarks taken in the light of the story, and the category at large, are mutedly ironic. Science in Poe's fiction is rarely the source for the miraculous or the sublime; it is invariably the means by which the grotesque is generated.

It is the failure of Templeton to have complete control over his powers which involves his patient in a journey from one realm to another. The mesmerist, unaware that his own musings have affected Bedloe, causes him to imagine that he has stumbled into another time and place. At the moment that Bedloe finds himself in the midst of an Eastern-looking city, Templeton had been busy jotting down incidents that happened to him and a friend in the city of Benares in 1780. Poe embellishes matters by having Bedloe resemble Templeton's dead friend. The events which appear to take place on Bedloe's excursion through the Virginia mountains coincide point for point with those experienced by Templeton and his friend. Thus Bedloe, because of the physician's special interest in him, in addition to their close mesmeric bond, is projected into another man's consciousness and experience. As he relates his experiences to Templeton, the patient appears profoundly confused. Here, the sense of disorientation that comes with an encounter

with the grotesque belongs to the patient as much as it does the physician. Bedloe's death, however, which follows soon after his strange adventure, is only remotely related to his experience in the mountains. The psychological impact of the experience is not explored beyond the point at which Bedloe finishes his account. He does not die because he is overwhelmed by its horror or its ambiguity. Such psychological realism one looks for in Hawthorne or Melville (i.e., "Roger Malvin's Burial" or "Benito Cerino"). Poe complicates the plot by introducing an artificial ambiguity, one not based on theme. Thus the sense of the grotesque that exists in the story is inflated beyond that which is generated by the mesmerist-patient relationship. Having contracted a cold, complicated by high blood pressure, Bedloe is accidentally poisoned by a leech among those used to bleed him for the purpose of relieving pressure. The similarity between his death and the death of Templeton's friend (who died from an arrow in the shape of a serpent) introduces a supernatural note at the end. It is further reinforced when the narrator realizes the curious similarity between the names Bedloe, and Oldeb, Templeton's dead friend: ". . . Bedlo, without the e, what is it but Oldeb conversed! And this man tells me it is a typographical error" (p. 687). Poe intensifies the mood of the story, and the sense of the grotesque, by suggesting the possibility of metempsychosis.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, however, the story loses its moral clarity

because it makes Templeton's responsibility for Bedloe's strange experience ambiguous.

If Poe's intentions in "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" are divided between using the grotesque for thematic purposes and using it for literary effect, his purposes once again crystallize in his satire, "Some Words with a Mummy." Here the theme of life-in-death reintroduces the grotesque in comic terms, as an Egyptian mummy is brought back to life. The effects of the grotesque, whether they originate within the gothic or comic mode, are, in essence, very much the same. They have the function of unsettling the observer, of clouding his perspective. In this particular story, the return of the mummy, Allamistakeo, to a living condition, serves the purpose of making suspect the idea of progress in the nineteenth century. The remarks of the mummy on the state of Egyptian learning undermine the egoism and vanity of Poe's learned men, who become profoundly shaken when they are told that the great scientific feats of their age had been anticipated by another.

Poe continually hints that his collection of scientists are likely candidates for an experience with the grotesque. The empirical minded men are presented as fools; they are men capable only of the most rudimentary kind of observation: "We searched the corpse very carefully for the usual openings through which the entrails are extracted, but, to our surprise, we could discover none. No member of

the party was at that period aware that entire or unopened mummies are not unfrequently met" (p. 537). The mummy, even after its life is renewed, perplexes the scientists who are uncertain of how to begin their investigation. Their pre-occupation with the bodily areas of the dead suggests a kind of necrophilia, an almost obscene interest, nearly bordering on love, in things dead. Further experimentation with the mummy through the application of a galvanic battery intensifies the motif: "It was only after much trouble that we succeeded in laying bare some portions of the temporal muscle which appeared of less stony rigidity than other portions of the frame, but which, as we had anticipated, of course, gave no indication of galvanic susceptibility when brought in contact with the wire" (p. 538).

In Poe's gothic fiction, the return of the dead to the world of the living is, as I have submitted, Poe's form of moral indictment. A similar return occurs in "Some Words with a Mummy," and, in this instance, the encounter of the living with what has once been dead involves a rhetorical rather than a symbolic confrontation. Allamistakeo, charged back to life by a galvanic battery, severely criticizes the scientists for having tampered with his person in their haphazard investigations:

"If I must say, gentlemen, that I am as much surprised as I am mortified at your behavior. Of Doctor Ponnorner nothing better was to be expected. He is a poor little fat fool who knows no better. I pity and forgive him. But you, Mr. Gliddon--and you, Silk--

who have travelled and resided in Egypt until one might imagine you to the manor born--you, I say, who have been so much among us that you speak Egyptian fully as well, I think, as you write your mother-tongue--you, whom I have always been led to regard as the firm friend of mummies--I really did anticipate more gentlemanly conduct from you. What am I to think of your standing quietly by and seeing me thus unhandsomely used?"

As the story proceeds, the indictment of Allamistakeo is enlarged; he goes on to contrast the accomplishments of his age with the pathetic efforts of the nineteenth century in such areas as architecture, science, and democracy. The most prominent butt of satire in the story, Doctor Ponnonner, attempts to salvage the prestige of his age in one last heroic effort: "We were now in imminent danger of being discomfited; but, as good luck would have it, Doctor Ponnonner, having rallied, returned to our rescue, and inquired if the people of Egypt would seriously pretend to rival the moderns in the all-important particular of dress" (p. 547). Only on this issue does he salvage the last shred of integrity for his age but, as is the case with so many other Poe protagonists, his perspective is distorted; he is incapable of making intelligent discriminations. As a hollow man, he has no meaningful value system, no intuition, no imagination. His empirical bent takes priority over everything else.

The essential matter of the grotesque in the story, the movement from death to life, is reinforced by the narrator's own observations on the age, observations which also suggest the nature of the grotesque. In his speculations



concerning the possible lines of conduct his associates might have followed after hearing the first words of the mummy, he remarks: ". . . Upon my word, I am at a loss to know how or why it was that we pursued neither the one nor the other. But, perhaps, the true reason is to be sought in the spirit of the age, which proceeds by the rule of contraries altogether, and is now usually admitted as the solution of every thing in the way of paradox and impossibility" (p. 539). The age itself, philosophically speaking, conveys the sense of the grotesque, a mixture of categories and realms. At the end of his experience, the narrator can only declare his disgust with his century: "The truth is, I am heartily sick of this life and of the nineteenth century in general. I am convinced that every thing is going wrong" (p. 547).

Poe's scientist is a man without a Hippocratic oath; he has no guide to conduct him, either in the moral or scientific areas of life. As an ostensible physician, he begins his office with the assumption that he is basically altruistic in his motives: he desires to relieve pain. He reaches a point in his ministrations, however, when he is no longer strictly interested in easing suffering. Instead, he becomes fascinated with the patient's moral, intellectual, and physical condition during the death agonies. His humanitarian purposes turn into an empirical experiment.

Searching for the great secrets of life and death, the discoveries of the Poe scientist turn out to be primarily one-sided; he is left only with the evidences of death in its most abhorrent form, and his knowledge of man's immortal condition is never fully communicated or understood. Poe's scientists and transcendental husbands pursue a quest for spiritual truths through fact, but they fail to make the necessary imaginative journey that would elevate them to a truly new perspective of life. Thoreau, for instance, by an act of imagination, miraculously transforms the grave into a cradle and declares that death is really a chrysalis:

Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society, deposited at first in the alburnum of the green and living tree, which has been gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned tomb,--heard perchance gnawing out now for years by the astonished family of man, as they sat round the festive board,--may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society's most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer at last!<sup>6</sup>

"Some of the most profound knowledge," Poe observes, "--perhaps all very profound knowledge--has originated from a highly stimulated imagination. Great intellects guess well. The laws of Kepler were, professedly, guesses" (Works, XIV, 187). Poe may have decried didacticism in his essays, but his fiction carries the burden of a continually restated point of view: the scientist who lives without the benefit of imagination or intuition confuses the good with empirical vision, a highly restricted perspective; and the investigation

he engages in turns out to be grotesque, visually and spiritually reductive.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Frieda Fordham, An Introduction to Jung's Psychology (Baltimore, 1953), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup>Carl G. Jung, Integration of the Personality (New York, 1939), p. 237.

<sup>3</sup>Grete de Francesco, The Power of the Charlatan, trans. Miriam Beard (New Haven, 1939), p. 32.

<sup>4</sup>Jung, pp. 228-29.

<sup>5</sup>Sidney E. Lind, in "Poe and Mesmerism," PMLA, LXII (1947), 1077-1094, attempts to refute the traditional interpretation of "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" which reads the story, in part, as a study in metempsychosis. A good deal of my own commentary of the story is indebted to Lind's point of view: that metempsychosis is an insignificant element in the text in contrast to the strong emphasis placed upon mesmerist-patient relationship.

<sup>6</sup>Walden and Civil Disobedience, ed. Sherman Paul (Boston, 1960), p. 227.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE SELF AND THE OTHER

Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal. We must keep our head in the one and our hands in the other. The conditions are met, if we keep our independence, yet do not lose our sympathy. These wonderful horses need to be driven by fine hands. We require such a solitude as shall hold to us its revelations when we are in the street and in palaces. . . . It is not the circumstances of seeing more or fewer people but the readiness of sympathy, that imports; and a sound mind will derive its principles from insight, with ever a purer ascent to the sufficient and absolute right, and will accept society as the natural element in which they are to be applied.<sup>1</sup>

Our health is our sound relation to external objects; our sympathy with external being.<sup>2</sup>

The excerpts from Emerson are typical of his journals and essays; they set up guidelines, if not directives, for human behavior, and the emphasis is always on human potential and the means to its fulfillment. Emerson continually stresses the need for the self to maintain harmonious relations with the world outside without losing selfhood. Like Emerson, Poe was also concerned with human potential, but in negative terms; and in these terms potential always means man's capacity for self-destruction rather than self-improvement. If Emerson presented philosophically the

conditions for man's spiritual and moral progress, Poe introduces in his fiction the other side of the coin. His stories are concerned with man's limitations and the moment to moment precariousness of his existence. Here the Emersonian concepts of the Me and the Not Me, found at the beginning of his essay on "Nature," what I have referred to as the Self and the Other, constitute the basic thematic opposites of Poe's fiction. In essence, they serve as an allegorized version of the Emersonian dialectic, and the relation of the one to the other establishes the basis of the grotesque for the category of "The Self and the Other." Philosophically speaking, all of Poe's stories involve the drama of these relations, but the last category of this study crystallizes the problem by illustrating stories that elevate it to a place of central importance. Elsewhere, the grotesque is associated with animals, mechanisms, or premature burials; here it is associated with a mysterious stranger (or strangers) who defies immediate recognition and identification.

The category is composed of two divisions: stories that examine the protagonist in a condition of psychological and philosophic withdrawal and those that depict him in an act of dilation, as he attempts to know and make contact with the Other. In the stories of the first division, the protagonist acts as though the Self were the only touchstone to ethical reality. Emersonian self-reliance becomes for

him self-apotheosis. Allen Tate, with reference to Eureka, has observed that Poe, in his role as artist, attempted to play God.<sup>3</sup> The autonomy of Poe's protagonists, if Tate is right, is carried over into the fiction as a partial projection of Poe, but Tate does not concern himself with the consequences of the protagonist's solipsistic behavior: the genesis of the grotesque. When something outside of the Self penetrates its consciousness, the Self finds it impossible to take the measure of the Other. Allegorically, the mysterious presence may stand for a psychological aspect of the Self or, more simply, he may be an inexplicable and puzzling member of the actual world. The Self, though appearing to possess the veneer of worldly sophistication, is essentially naïve and fails to grasp crucial psychological or philosophic truths associated with the Other. The stories that depict the Self in dilation serve as a variant of the first group. Here the protagonist reveals an interest in the world that lies outside the Self. His motive, however, is intellectual interest rather than human sympathy, and he makes no effort to establish relations with the Other. Only once, in "The Spectacles," does the protagonist actually experience some form of feeling; but Poe presents it in satiric terms, as a caricature of love at first sight. Knowledge, not union and communion, propels him beyond the narrow circle of himself.

Eight stories make up the category: "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845), "William Wilson" (1836), "The Mask of the Red Death" (1842), "The Angel of the Odd" (1845), "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," (1840), "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether," (1845), and "The Spectacles" (1844). The first four stories reveal the protagonist in withdrawal, while the last four furnish a countermovement: the protagonist in dilation. The first story of the category, "The Imp of the Perverse," is useful as an illustration of the way in which the grotesque works within the category. If it does not subscribe to the letter of the pattern, it does subscribe to the spirit. In this instance, Poe deals with a quality within human nature that might be considered in Freudian terms as a death instinct. Poe merely labels it perverseness. Yet within the story it is treated as though it were a mysterious intruder and takes on, as the title suggests, an allegorical aspect. In "William Wilson" Poe does, in fact, use an actual protagonist as an allegorical symbol, a side of the self that has been repressed and hindered from participating in governing the personality to which it belongs. The dramatic action of the story involves the appearance of a second Wilson, the buried self, who periodically haunts its amoral counterpart. "The Mask of the Red Death" continues the pattern of the first two stories. The crucial difference lies in the identity of the intruder, the allegorical Red Death. Here Poe



employs a metaphysical rather than a psychological abstraction dramatically as a basis for the evocation of the grotesque. The grotesque in "The Angel of the Odd" is presented in comic terms; in fact; Poe subtitles the story an extravaganza. The protagonist is a hedonist; he cultivates literature and a taste for exotic food in the privacy of his isolation, but his pleasures are interrupted by a visitor whose body is composed of a wine-pipe and wine-kegs, comic manifestations of the grotesque. The last four stories in this group supply the countermovement. In "The Man of the Crowd" the protagonist moves in the direction of the Other, momentarily extending himself in order to discover the nature and identity of a mysterious figure who roams the city. The last three stories of the category, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether," and, "The Spectacles" differ from the other stories in one major respect: human agencies, unallegorized, serve as the source of the grotesque. In the first of these three, the protagonist Dupin demonstrates a capacity for understanding the Other, which involves more than mere analytic ability. He is capable of grasping the underlying causes of the grotesque through empathy, and he is the only figure in Poe who might, in some measure, come close to a human norm. These last stories of the category are satires on men who are so entirely disengaged from the imaginative and intuitive life, and so immersed in the

external world, that they lose the ability to make meaningful discriminations and judgments.

"The Imp of the Perverse" is a curious mixture of the thematic and fictional modes. More than half of the story is an exposition on the inadequacy of phrenology as an explanation for human behavior. The remainder constitutes the fable, the narrator's account of his own mysterious and inexplicable behavior, unaccounted for even by men of intellect and logic, in a word, phrenologists. The narrator declares that phrenologists ". . . have failed to make room for a propensity which, although obviously existing as a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment, has been equally overlooked by all of the moralists who have preceded them. In the pure arrogance of reason we have all overlooked it" (p. 280). The excerpt suggests once again the conditions which generate the grotesque. Because of his overdependence on reason, man fails to take into account other levels of consciousness and being that are also part of the Self. Ignored as they are, they eventually assert their right to exist, along with the rational mind, and once their presence is felt, they generate in man a nameless dread. In this particular story, the grotesque possesses an added quality which is missing, or minimized, in other stories: it is seductive as well as fearful. Here the pit, central to the thematic structure of stories in another category, becomes a crucial metaphor expressive of the grotesque, in Freudian terms, an uncontrollable death wish:

We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss--we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably we remain. By slow degrees our sickness and dizziness and horror become merged in a cloud of unnamable feeling. By gradations, still more imperceptible, this cloud assumes shape, as did the vapor from the bottle out of which arose the genius in the Arabian Nights. But out of this our cloud upon the precipice's edge, there grows into palpability, a shape, far more terrible than any genius or demon of a tale, and yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height. And this fall--this rushing annihilation--for this very reason that it involves that one most ghastly and loathsome of all the most ghastly images of death and suffering which have ever presented themselves to our imagination--for this very cause do we now the most vividly desire it. (p. 282)

For the narrator the experience both repels and attracts; it is sublime as well as it is terrible.

The narrator's personal history offers a cogent illustration of the possible consequences that follow as a result of his failure to recognize areas of being coexisting along with the logical and the rational. He furnishes a history of events leading up to a perfect murder, achieved through the use of a poisoned taper. For a while the narrator enjoys the material gain inherited from his victim, but eventually some aspect of the Self returns, claiming for itself its share of existence in the human personality: ". . . my own casual self-suggestion, that I might possibly be fool enough to confess the murder of which I had been guilty, confronted me as if the very ghost of him I had

murdered--and beckoned me on to death" (p. 284). Poe dramatizes in the obsessional behavior of his protagonist a fundamental human need: punishment for crime. The essential difference between him and Roskolnikov is the latter's eventual recognition and acceptance of his own moral nature, but when this moral nature begins to manifest itself, Poe's protagonist can only consider it a malevolent force bent on his destruction: "As it is, you will easily perceive that I am one of the many uncounted victims of the Imp of the Perverse" (p. 283). Poe's protagonists--the narrator here is a case in point--never achieve the moral or psychological perspective that would erase the phantoms of the grotesque from their consciousness. They remain haunted by elusive specters. In this instance, the narrator is mesmerized into helplessness as the Other begins to wield its influence over his behavior:

At first, I made an effort to shake off this nightmare of the soul. I walked vigorously--faster--still faster--at length I ran. I felt a maddening desire to shriek aloud. Every succeeding wave of thought overwhelmed me with new terror, for, alas! I well, too well, understood that to think, in my situation, was to be lost. I still quickened my pace. I bounded like a madman through the crowded thoroughfares. At length the populace took the alarm, and pursued me. I felt then the consummation of my fate. Could I have torn out my tongue, I would have done it--but a rough voice resounded in my ears--a rougher grasp seized me by the shoulder. I turned--I gasped for breath. For a moment I experience all the pangs of suffocation; I became blind, and deaf, and giddy; and then some invisible fiend, I thought, struck me with his broad palm upon the back. The long-imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul. (p. 284)

The protagonist's own nature has been so foreign to him that, in order to acknowledge it at all, he must elevate it to the level of a personification. Only in terms of "some invisible fiend" can he acknowledge the existence of a side of himself that has been exiled and cut off from participation in the life of the Self.

Thematically, "William Wilson" is an extended version of "The Imp of the Perverse;" Poe moves beyond metaphorical suggestion to consistent personification, as he locates an actual character within the fiction who embodies a moral and psychological dimension of the protagonist's Self. A brief consideration of one of the current approaches to the story will reveal how close its theme lies to the aesthetics of the grotesque. "William Wilson" is an example of the story of the double. It presents ". . . the mythical archetype known as the Doppelganger, a spiritual emanation of the self as it ought to be, and hence a standing rebuke to the ego. . . ." <sup>4</sup> Poe's psychological theme is represented in the structure of the story, through the periodic appearances of the other Wilson, whose mysterious identity is an affliction to the narrator. With "William Wilson" the pattern of the grotesque is firmly established for the category: the visitation of the alien presence, the protagonist's cumulative horror, the failure to establish the nature and identity of the Other.

Although the fiction represents Wilson as living in the actual world, his relations with it are solely for the

purpose of self-emolument; he has no moral or psychological stake in it. Even at a very early age, he is a law unto himself, and his human ties are virtually non-existent. In fact his withdrawal is complete as a child, and he never moves beyond the child's perspective: "Encompassed by the massy walls of this venerable academy, I passed, yet not in tedium or disgust, the years of the third lustrum of my life. The teeming brain of childhood requires no external world of incident to occupy or amuse it; and the apparent dismal monotony of a school was replete with more intense excitement than my riper youth has derived from luxury, or my full manhood from crime" (p. 629). Even the geography conveys to the reader Wilson's isolation. His earliest recollections are connected with a large, rambling Elizabethan house situated in a "dream-like and spirit-soothing place." The grounds around the house are extensive, "and a high and solid brick wall, topped with a bed of mortar and broken glass, encompassed the whole" (p. 627). Wilson, however, does not encounter his namesake until he begins to use people for his own gratifications. Unwilling or unable to establish the Emersonian reciprocity of the Self in relation to the Other, he unknowingly brings on a specter of the grotesque, from the allegorical point of view, the materialization of his alter ego. Despite Wilson's recollections of a previous encounter, the double eludes recognition:

. . . I discovered, or fancied I discovered, in his accent, in his air, and general appearance, a something

which first startled, and then deeply interested me, by bringing to mind dim visions of my earliest infancy-- wild, confused, and thronging memories of a time when memory herself was yet unborn. I cannot better describe the sensation which oppressed me, than by saying that I could with difficulty shake off the belief of my having been acquainted with the being who stood before me, at some epoch very long ago--some point of the past even infinitely remote. (p. 633)

At this point in the fiction, Wilson tries to overcome his growing terror of the Other by reversing roles and becoming, in effect, the intruder. Planning a practical joke at the expense of the other Wilson, the protagonist approaches the bed of his double one night and comes close to making a profound discovery; everything about the sleeping figure leads the visitor to believe that he is looking, not at a stranger, but at another version of himself:

I looked;--and a numbness, an iciness of feeling instantly pervaded my frame. My breast heaved, my knees tottered, my whole spirit became possessed with an objectless yet intolerable horror. Gasping for breath, I lowered the lamp in still nearer proximity to the face. Were these--these the lineaments of William Wilson? I saw, indeed, that they were his, but I shook as if with a fit of the ague, in fancying they were not. What was there about them to confound me in this manner? I gazed;--while my brain reeled with a multitude of incoherent thoughts. Not thus he appeared--assuredly not thus--in the vivacity of his waking hours. The same name! the same contour of person! the same day of arrival at the academy! And then his dogged and meaningless imitation of my gait, my voice, my habits, and my manners! Was it, in truth, within the bounds of human possibility, that what I now saw was the result, merely, of the habitual practice of this sarcastic imitation? Awe-stricken, and with a creeping shudder, I extinguished the lamp, passed silently from the chamber, and left, at once, the halls of the old academy, never to enter them again. (p. 634)

The remainder of the story involves Wilson's continued efforts to escape the double who continually follows him

from country to country in a periodic moral confrontation, suggesting once again the pattern of the grotesque as it exists in the marriage group. Only at the end of the story, when Wilson stabs his own image, is the nature and identity of the Other revealed, and the limbo world of the grotesque disappears for Wilson in the eventual moral clarity of the event.

Wilson, in contrast to the other Poe protagonists who encounter the grotesque, demonstrates, as the aftermath of his experience, not only a new intellectual astuteness but also a largeness of moral vision. Unlike his counterparts, he seems to obtain a new perspective of his relations with the Other. As he recounts the singular incidents of his life to the reader, he seems conscious of his own solipsistic turn of mind: "I am the descendent of a race whose imaginative and easily excitable temperament has at all times rendered them remarkable; and, in my earliest infancy, I gave evidence of having fully inherited the family character. . . . I was left to the guidance of my own will, and became, in all but name, the master of my own actions" (pp. 626-627). As a child and man Wilson establishes no meaningful human ties. Only in anticipation of death does he gain the necessary but belated insight into the relations of the Self and the Other as they should be: "I long, in passing through the dim valley, for the sympathy--I had nearly said for the pity--of my fellow men" (p. 626). At



the same time he acknowledges that he has been a man living purely within himself: "Have I not indeed been living in a dream? Am I not now dying a victim to the horror and the mystery of the wildest of all sublunary visions?" (p. 626).

Similar to the first two stories of the category "The Mask of the Red Death" invests an abstraction with the qualities of the grotesque. In this instance, the Red Death, some form of plague, comes unannounced and uninvited to the court of Prospero, and men are defenseless against him. It is not surprising that in this particular story Poe is so overtly--I might say woodenly--allegorical. Poe's encounter with the cholera plague of 1831 and his well-known morbidity toward death generally are facts that help to explain the immediacy of the allegory, in contrast to stories in which allegory is hinted at but not coherently established in the fiction. "The Mask of the Red Death," in addition to many other cases in point, offers testimony to the fact that Poe found the appropriate objective correlates for his own fear of death in the materials of his art. More important, however, than reading the story as psychological biography is the philosophic dimension in it that Poe achieves.

"The Mask of the Red Death" is not simply a fictional essay on the horrors of death, meant only to appall the reader. Here, as elsewhere in this study, the grotesque carries a philosophical burden. The death which visits

Prospero's court is another version of the Other, a necessary reality, left unacknowledged and unclaimed by the Self. The pattern of the first two stories reasserts itself again. Here the collective Self, Prospero and his retinue, fears the reality of the Other and withdraws into the privacy of its own consciousness, only to be intruded upon by the Red Death who has been denied admission to it. Prospero and his followers try to ignore mutability and decay. By walling out the Red Death, and revelling in the pleasures created by Prospero, the court gropes for an eternal transcendental condition: "There were buffoons, there were provisions, there were ballet dancers, there were musicians, there was wine" (p. 269). The inhabitants of the castle in their masquerade costumes constitute "a multitude of dreams." Prospero is presented as another version of Ligeia's husband, a would-be transcendentalist, who attempts to evoke through the elaborateness of setting a sense of the sublime; but like others of his kind, he possesses a vision of life which is too narrow and too exclusive. Indeed, his problem is that he is not inclusive in the Emersonian sense. The result is that death becomes a manifestation of the grotesque; it imposes itself on those who have denied it, just as William Wilson's alter ego returns periodically to chastize the amoral Self. Joseph Roppollo, in his own reading of the story, offers a complementary point of view: "On one level, the reader is introduced to a disease, a plague, with hideous and terrifying

symptoms, a remarkably rapid course, and inevitable termination in death. But Poe's heaviest emphasis is on blood, not as sign or symptom, but as avatar and seal. A seal is something that confirms or assures or ratifies. . . . Blood represents something invisible and eternal, a ruling principle of the universe. The principle, Poe seems to suggest, is death."<sup>5</sup>

The failure of Prospero and his followers to grasp the philosophical principle associated with the Red Death paves the way for their encounter with the grotesque. When they are apparently most secure, physically and psychologically insulated from the Other, the threshold of their awareness is alerted to an ominous presence. Death, the unacceptable reality of their human condition, makes his appearance. In physical terms "The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. The mask which concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have had difficulty in detecting the cheat. . . . His vesture was dabbled in blood--and his broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror" (p. 272). Death as an invisible principle of life becomes visible only when it is clothed in the uncertain and tentative imaginative concepts of the human mind. Because the Self fails to realize intuitively its relation to the Other, the intrusion of the Other

on the withdrawn protagonists can only take the form of the grotesque. Death is invisible and yet visible, known and unknown, but like the Imp of the Perverse or the second William Wilson, it is a component of life.

"The Angel of the Odd" brings to a close the first subdivision of the category, the Self in withdrawal. Though the philosophic implication of the story in no way differs from the first three, generically it is a farce-comedy. Here the protagonist as solipsistic Self serves as an object of satire because of his very typicality: isolated, asocial, narcissistic. The "I" of the story sits alone in the dining room enjoying the private pleasures of exotic food and wine, immersing himself, as well, in a variety of books. Browsing through a newspaper becomes his only point of contact with society, but the activity only brings about his annoyance. A paragraph he lands upon concerning an unusual death fills him with rage, and he reviles the "pitiable penny-a-liner" for perpetrating a hoax, for the protagonist refuses to believe in what is singular and unusual. He denies what exists beyond his own sense of logic and reason. Despite the limitations of the story--it fails to have the richness and complexity of "William Wilson"--the nature and function of the grotesque remain unaltered. A mysterious presence appears to the "I" whose qualities seem to have appropriate points of contact with the protagonist's disposition and propensities. The figure is a comic version of the grotesque,

a Falstaffian spectre, whose entrance proves the existence of the odd and whose appearance serves as an exaggerated projection of the protagonist's hedonistic nature: "His body was a wine-pipe, or a rum-puncheon, or something of that character, and had a truly Falstaffian air. In its nether extremity were inserted two kegs, which seemed to answer all the purposes of legs. For arms there dangled from the upper portion of the carcass two tolerably long bottles, with necks outward for hands" (p. 377).

"The Angel of the Odd" presents a comic modification of the pattern of the grotesque occurring in other stories: some rejected aspect of human nature, transformed beyond human recognition and understanding, returning to haunt the owner of the house, the Self. The narrator informs us that the Angel of the Odd ". . . was the genius who presided over the contretemps of mankind, and whose business it was to bring about the odd accidents which are continually astonishing the skeptic" (p. 379). The comic action of the story places the protagonist in a series of situations that offer proof of the existence of the odd. Instrumental in bringing them about is the mysterious presence who has entered the world of the skeptic as a corrective and punishment for his skepticism. As a result the normal order of the protagonist's life changes through the occurrence of odd and inexplicable events: the skeptic oversleeps and misses an opportunity to renew the insurance on his house; he dreams of the Angel of

the Odd and awakens to find his house on fire, fracturing an arm as he escapes; later he loses two prospective wives in consecutive courtships through unintended shocks and insults. Attempting suicide, he throws himself over a precipice but grasps the long end of a guide-rope hanging from a passing balloon, only to have it cut by the Angel of the Odd. Directly over his house at the time, he falls through the chimney into the ashes of an extinguished fire. In short, the skeptic's universe becomes neither logical nor predictable. As a personification of the grotesque, the Angel of the Odd makes disorientation a principle of existence, and the "I" of the story, who appears at the outset to be in complete control, loses all control as his life is reduced to a comic absurdity. Operating within a comic form, the conditions of the grotesque serve a satiric purpose.

"The Man of the Crowd" initiates the countermovement of the category. It is more than coincidental that this story and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" were published in 1840, for Dupin and the observer in "The Man of the Crowd" are versions of each other. Both live within themselves, yet each is capable of a partial dilation because of his interest in what lies outside of his private consciousness. They differ from most of Poe's protagonists in that they are not completely alienated from others; they live on the margin of the human community, but rarely move into an association with it. Their stories, however, begin at the

point at which they have been arrested by the enigmatic presence of the Other; indeed, they willfully move into an association with the source of the grotesque, and because these protagonists are basically analysts, the grotesque fascinates rather than repels.

At the beginning of "The Man of the Crowd" the protagonist is possessed of a sense of well-being. He demonstrates an interest in the men seated around him in a coffee house, and for him "merely to breathe was enjoyment." At first glance the protagonist is suggestive of the Emersonian man in his healthy relations with himself and in his potential for relationships with others, but the Emersonian disposition never fully materializes. A physical rather than a philosophical well-being simulates in him a spiritual buoyancy: "For some months I had been in ill health, but was now convalescent, and, with returning strength, found myself in one of those happy moods which are so precisely the converse of ennui--moods of the keenest appetancy, when the film from the mental vision departs . . . and the intellect, electrified, surpasses as greatly its everyday condition, as does the vivid yet candid reason of Leibnitz . . ." (p. 475). Poe spends two pages citing the narrator's interest in the passing human parade, but the man himself is divorced from human sympathy: "At first my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in masses, and thought of them in their aggregate relations" (p. 476).

The individuals whom the observer scans are entirely classifiable and of no real compelling interest to him: he remains satisfied in merely establishing the social identities of those around him, but otherwise he is spiritually aloof. After having observed the crowd through the coffee house window for some time, the narrator fastens on a countenance which at once arrests and absorbs him. At this point in the story, the pattern of the grotesque emerges: "As I endeavored, during the brief minute of my original survey, to form some analysis of the meaning conveyed, there arose confusedly and paradoxically in my mind, the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense--of supreme despair (p. 478). The image of the man is made up of an assortment of human qualities which seem to typify collective man and the grotesque presence tantalizes and fascinates rather than repels.

As in the first three stories, the intruder is invested with an allegorical identity, but the nature of that identity is somewhat ambiguous and seems to possess both philosophical and psychological referents. Existentially, the Man of the Crowd is the quintessence of loneliness, anxiety, guilt, and damnation, modern man moving aimlessly through the city. Psychologically, he may stand for the observer's alter ego, the inner self, and the observer's encounter with this stranger has been well prepared for.



Alone, and recuperating from some unknown malady, the narrator experiences a heightening of his intellectual powers and a sensitivity to what lies outside his immediate consciousness. If he suddenly comes upon a vision of human nature in all its variety, he does so because he himself is composed of that constellation of qualities which make it up. In other words, the Man of the Crowd has a momentary glimpse of the Self: alone and friendless, a mixture of virtues and vice. The narrator is indeed suggestive when he informs the reader that the stranger ". . . wore a pair of caoutchoic overshoes, and could move about in perfect silence" (p. 480). The narrator's ability to understand the nature and identity of the grotesque, however, is severely limited: "It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds" (p. 481). The very haunts which the Man of the Crowd has visited have also been visited by the observer, and if the mysterious stranger remains a manifestation of the grotesque, he does so because the observer has not been able to achieve a complete perspective of himself in his relations to the Other: he fails to realize the obsessive image he follows as an aspect of his own being. Dupin, in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" provides a significant comment on the whole question of perspective as it applies to the observer in "The Man of the Crowd." Dupin has been critical of Vidocq's methods of investigation:

He impaired his vision by holding the object too close. He might see, perhaps, one or two points with unusual clearness, but in so doing he, necessarily, lost sight of the matter as a whole. Thus there is such a thing as being too profound. Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the most important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial. The depth lies in the valleys where we seek her, and not upon the mountain tops where she is found. The modes and sources of this kind of error are well typified in the contemplation of the heavenly bodies. . . . By undue profundity we perplex and enfeeble thought; and it is possible to make even Venus herself vanish from the firmament by a scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct. (p. 153)

The observer in "The Man of the Crowd," similar to Vidocq, is a "good guesser" and a "persevering man." His knowledge of the mysterious figure comes largely from ocular observation: "His clothes, generally, were filthy and ragged; but as he came, now and then, within the strong glare of the lamp, I perceived that his linen, although dirty, was of a beautiful texture; and my vision deceived me, or, through a rent in a closely buttoned and evidently second hand roquelauze which enveloped him, I caught a glimpse both of a diamond and of a dagger" (p. 479). But even though the observer is capable of sensitive speculation about the man, illustrated by his earlier reflections, he lacks the necessary insight and empathy that would take him beyond his concluding remarks: "The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the 'Hortus Animae,' and perhaps it is but one of the greatest mercies of God that 'er lasst sich nicht lesen'" (p. 481). The Man of the Crowd refuses to yield up

his secret because the observer, as is the case with William Wilson before he stabs his own image, is a mystery to himself.

In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" the relations of the Self and the Other are divorced from the allegorical mode, and the sources of the grotesque belong to the external world, what constitutes Poe's presentation of authentic reality. Although the pattern of the grotesque resembles that of the earlier stories in the category, the moral implications, usually associated with it, are missing. Almost all of Poe's protagonists are destined for an encounter with the grotesque because of some inherent flaw in their own natures which prevents them from understanding themselves; but in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" the protagonist not only confronts the grotesque but identifies it and locates its source. Dupin does what no other figure in Poe is capable of because Poe establishes the pattern of the Self in relation to the Other primarily as an exercise of his aesthetic materials rather than as a psychological and moral study. Dupin is meant to succeed in mastering the grotesque where William Wilson and the nameless observer in the previous story fail. His success, however, is also a measure of his human potential, of his Emersonian viability, which is first hinted at in his relations with his creditors. The narrator tells us that "By courtesy of his creditors, there still remained in his possession a small remnant of his patrimony . . ." (p. 143). Dupin is evidently a man who generates

in others feelings of respect and sympathy. The narrator himself finds in Dupin a friend whose sensibilities nourish his own: "We saw each other again and again. I was deeply interested in the little family history which he detailed to me with all that candor which a Frenchman indulges in whenever mere self is the theme. I was astonished, too, at the vast extent of his reading; and, above all, I felt my soul enkindled within me by the wild fervor, and the vivid freshness of his imagination. Seeking in Paris the objects I then sought, I felt that the society of such a man would be to me a treasure beyond price . . ." (p. 143). Dupin, then, although he cultivates isolation, is not an absolute solipsist; a bond of friendship exists between him and the narrator establishing paradoxically enough a community of isolation: "Had the routine of our life at this place been known to the world," the narrator remarks, "we should have been regarded as madmen--although, perhaps, as madmen of a harmless nature. Our seclusion was perfect. We admitted no visitors. Indeed the locality of our retirement had been carefully kept a secret from my own former associates; and it had been many years since Dupin had ceased to know or be known in Paris. We existed within ourselves alone" (p. 144). In the private communion they keep with each other, Dupin and the narrator exhibit a relationship, almost unparalleled in Poe; it is nearly a romance. Most of the adulation, however, is on the side of the narrator. Even here mutuality

does not really exist. Yet Dupin is, in some measure, dependent on the friendship and finds the relationship harmonious. At the very beginning of the story, then, Dupin's association with the narrator is an index of his potential to extend himself. The story does in fact represent Dupin existing in two realms; he lives both in and outside of himself and is capable of dilation as well as withdrawal. In this case Dupin's dilation, his ability to put himself in the place of the Other, is the basis through which he comprehends the nature of the grotesque.

Aspects of the grotesque are introduced into the story in the form of two atrocious murders, which serve as a challenge to his human resources. Dupin, through the offices of the Parisienne police, is brought into contact with an agent or agencies, completely alien to normal human comprehension. Like other men he stands at the boundary line separating ignorance from knowledge, minimal cues from tangible fact, but in contrast to them he is eventually able to cross over to the other side. Each witness's disposition relative to the murder which Dupin reads reflects the inadequacy of mere sense impressions, of the limitation of human cognition. Two serve merely as illustrations:

"Isidore Muset, gendarme, deposes that he was called to the house three o'clock in the morning. . . . Upon reaching the first landing, heard two voices in loud angry contention--the one a gruff voice, the other much shriller--a very strange voice. Could distinguish some words of the former, which was that of a Frenchman. . . . The shrill voice was that of a foreigner.

Could not be sure whether it was the voice of a man or of a woman. Could not make out what was said, but believed the language to be Spanish. . . .

"Henry Duval, a neighbor, and by trade a silver-smith, deposes that he was one of the party who first entered the house. . . . The shrill voice, this witness thinks, was that of an Italian. Was certain it was not French. Could not be sure that it was a man's voice. It might have been a woman's. Was not acquainted with the Italian language. Could not distinguish the words, but was convinced by the intonation that the speaker was an Italian. . . ." (p. 149)

Through careful investigation, Dupin concludes that the deaths of Mademoiselle L'Espanaye and her daughter were caused by something sub-rational, an ourang-outang. (Poe once again introduces the grotesque as a violation of the human realm by an animal.) But the ourang-outang is not the sole agency of the grotesque, although it is the most fearful. Owned by an unfortunate Maltese sailor, the animal escapes from its master and becomes enraged. The other intruder, however, is not regarded as a danger or a threat to society, but merely as a wretched person subject to the whims of chance. The great feat of Dupin, less spectacular than his intellectual abilities, is his capacity for putting himself in the place of the Other, in this case a man who is desperate and alone:

Cognizant though innocent of the murder, the Frenchman will naturally hesitate about replying to the advertisement--about demanding the Ourang-Outang. He will reason thus: 'I am innocent; I am poor; my Ourang-Outang is of great value--to one in my circumstances a fortune of itself--why should I lose it through idle apprehensions of danger? Here it is, within my grasp. It was found in the Bois de Boulogne--at a vast distance from the scene of that

butchery. How can it ever be suspected that a brute beast should have done the deed? (p. 163)

Dupin contrasts his own ability, his powers of empathy, to the limited intellectual ability of the Prefect: ". . . our friend the Prefect is somewhat too cunning to be profound. In his wisdom is no stamen. It is all head and no body . . ." (p. 268). If Dupin in his egotism and self-involvement prevents the reader from looking upon him as a whole man, he demonstrates both in theory and practice a human potential unavailable in any other Poe protagonist, with the possible exception of William Wilson; and with it he shows himself capable of comprehending the causes of the grotesque.

The levity with which Poe uses the grotesque in "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" brings to mind "The Angel of the Odd." Although both stories appear to be illustrative of Poe at his most superficial, the fact that they are satiric in intent should, to some degree, redeem them from a categorical dismissal. The former is a farce-comedy with little substance to its plot; the latter, also essentially comedy, exists without the apparatus of fantasy or the fantastic. In each case the story provides a documentary of the protagonist's responses to his perplexing world. In his comment on "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" Quinn remarks: "It is no wonder that an editor hesitated, for while the story is a clever picture of the capture of a French insane asylum by its inmates, the tale

is not important."<sup>6</sup> Quinn is right to the extent that the story isolated from the rest of Poe's fiction is a poor offering, and a story must ultimately stand or fall on its own merit. Yet for better or worse, a good deal of Poe's fiction becomes significant when it is seen as part of a pattern.

In his relation to the observer in "The Man of the Crowd" or Dupin in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" the protagonist is presented in complete dilation; he appears to be a sophisticated man of the world (but, for that matter, so does the protagonist in "The Angel of the Odd," despite the fact that he has nothing to do with the world). In contrast to so many other Poe protagonists, he lacks intuition and imagination. In essence, he is a completely socialized man, yet the whole satiric point of the story insists on the protagonist's shallowness and limited perspective. Though he may exist fully outside of the Self, he is nevertheless unaware of the deceptions that exist around him. Here Poe seems to take a position on an extreme in human behavior rarely examined in his fiction; he satirizes the man who lives almost entirely outside of his own consciousness, the man dependent on external guides for direction. If the qualities of Poe's solipsistic men are contemplativeness and psychological-self-reliance, the opposite is true for the protagonist in this instance: he appears gregarious and credulous. His interest in the Other is marked by his



activity at the beginning of the story; the protagonist has been touring the south of France and decides to visit a private madhouse in the immediate vicinity. Unknown to him, however, is the fact that the inmates have escaped and preside as guests. The entire story is taken up with the confusion of realms, the exchange of roles between the sane and the insane, as a condition of the grotesque which afflicts the protagonist.

Escorted through the asylum by his host, a former superintendent of the establishment who has gone mad, the yet unsuspecting narrator becomes his pawn, and is easily manipulated and influenced. The narrator is told that the "soothing system," the former treatment of the inmates, is no longer in operation. In response to his surprise, the host cannily replies: "You are young yet, my friend . . . but the time will arrive when you will learn to judge for yourself of what is going on in the world, without trusting to the gossip of others. Believe nothing you hear, and only one half that you see" (p. 310). Although the narrator's ocular observations testify to the strangeness of the people he meets, he lacks both conviction and an inner light. His worldly sophistication is, in fact, the very reason he confuses appearance for reality: "Upon the whole," he observes, "I could not help thinking that there was much of the bizarre about everything I saw--but then the world is made up of all kinds of persons, with all modes of thought, and all sorts

of conventional customs. I had travelled, too, so much, as to be quite an adept at the nil admirari . . ." (p. 312).

Because the narrator pays deference to his own specious worldliness, his intuition and insight are never cultivated; thus he dines with madmen and attributes their odd behavior to the mannerisms of the province. A man at the dinner table puts his thumb in his left cheek and makes noises; a woman in the group begins to crow; instruments blare as the guests eat their dinner; a man jumps on top of the table and begins to make an oration. Because of these incidents, a sense of the grotesque begins to intrude itself on the narrator's consciousness. From his angle of vision, the sane and the insane do not seem to be neatly deposited in their respective categories, for the guests appear to be more like inmates than normal people; but the fusion of realms appears at its most grotesque when the keepers, who have been tarred and feathered by the madmen, escape from their confinement looking like baboons, adding the final siege to the protagonist's already precarious equilibrium. Poe, however, continues to satirize the narrator's naïveté up to the conclusion. In his failure to understand the duplicity of the host, even after the tarred and feathered keepers have escaped, he continues to hunt for the works by the ostensible authors of the soothing system: "I have only to add that, although I have searched every library in Europe for the works of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether, I

have, up to the present day, utterly failed in my endeavors to procure a copy" (p. 321).

"The Spectacles," a comic tour de force, drives home better than any other story in the category the relationship between distorted perspective and the grotesque. The protagonist, like his counterpart in "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether," is very much in and of the world. Wealthy, handsome, and culturally sophisticated, his only physical drawback is weak eyes, which his youthful vanity refuses to allow him to correct with spectacles. In addition to this aspect of characterization, Poe also presents him as a ludicrously comic version of the transcendental protagonist. Similar to the husbands in the marriage group, the young man is a worshiper of the sublime, manifested in the beauty of woman: "The magic of a lovely form in woman--the necromancy of female gracefulness--was always a power which I found it impossible to resist . . ." (p. 689). But in contrast to them his ideal is found in society and the world rather than in a nameless city on the Rhine (e.g., "Ligeia") or in an isolated Eden (e.g., "Eleonora"). Thematically, the story involves the inability of the protagonist, because of his shallowness and vanity, to distinguish between the sublime and the grotesque. The consequent punishment that follows is his apparent marriage to what is grotesque.

The plot of the story centers on the protagonist's sudden discovery at the opera of an ostensibly beautiful

woman: ". . . but here was grace personified, incarnate, the beau ideal of my wildest and most enthusiastic visions" (p. 689). Although he is transported by only a partial glimpse of her, on seeing her entire profile, his expectations are surpassed; yet something mysteriously elusive seems to be associated with this person. The protagonist remarks: ". . . there was something about it [the woman's beauty] which disappointed me without my being able to tell exactly what it was" (p. 690). After forcing a meeting with the woman, he finally secures a promise of marriage, but only after he has promised his betrothed to wear spectacles:

"You shall conquer, then, mon ami," said she, "for the sake of the Eugenie whom you love, this little weakness which you have at last confessed--this weakness more moral than physical--and which, let me assure you, is so unbecoming the nobility of your usual character--and which, if permitted further control, will assuredly involve you, sooner or later, in some very disagreeable scrape. You shall conquer, for my sake, this affectation which leads you, as you yourself acknowledge, to the tacit or implied denial of your infirmity of vision. For, this infirmity you virtually deny, refusing to employ the customary means for its relief. You will understand me to say then, that I wish you to wear spectacles. . . ." (p. 701)

It is significant that the betrothed, Poe's agent of the grotesque, considers the protagonist's weakness "more moral than physical." It is one of the few instances in Poe's fiction in which a moral flaw, small though it may be, is equated with a literally distorted perspective.

It is only after the marriage occurs that the protagonist experiences the sudden transformation of the sublime

into the grotesque. Putting on the spectacles given to him by his wife, he sees for the first time the object of his immoderate and misguided passion:

"Goodness gracious me!" I exclaimed, almost at the very instant that the rim of the spectacles had settled upon my nose--"My! goodness gracious me!--why what can be the matter with these glasses?" and taking them quickly off, I wiped them carefully with a silk handkerchief and adjusted them again.

But if, in the first instance, there had occurred something which occasioned me surprise, in the second, this surprise became elevated into astonishment; and this astonishment was profound--was extreme--indeed I may say it was horrific. What, in the name of everything hideous, did this mean? Could I believe my eyes?--could I?--that was the question. Was that--was that--was that rouge? And were those--and were those wrinkles, upon the visage of Eugenie Lalande? and oh! . . . what--what--what--what had become of her teeth? (p. 703)

The wife turns out to be the protagonist's great, great grandmother, who had decided to punish the young man for making a fool of himself (through his overtures to an old and unknown woman) in the theatre. The marriage turns out to be fake, performed by a man posing as a clergyman. The comic ordeal of the grotesque over with, and the punishment exacted, the young man becomes the husband of a beautiful young woman and the heir to his great, great grandmother's fortune. Here, in contrast to nearly all of Poe's other tales, the story is one of the few instances in which a protagonist actually undergoes a change in behavior: "I am done forever with billet doux, and am never to be met without SPECTACLES" (p. 707). Literally and figuratively, he achieves a new vision of life.

The fiction in this category illustrates graphically certain qualities ever present in Poe no matter how trifling it may appear to be. Even in stories which are essentially potboilers, Poe manages to suggest one of the controlling ideas of his major work, i.e., the loss of perspective, in essence, a moral condition resulting from man's withdrawal from the world or his excessive involvement in it. Even in the rather thin comedies, the formal elements establish the loss of perspective in dramatic terms by confronting the protagonist with a world that is perilous and unpredictable; but these conditions, though they are often presented with levity, exist because Poe's men are lost to themselves first and then lost in the world they inhabit. Given their flawed human condition, they can only experience the world as grotesque.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Emerson's Journals, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, Vol. V (Boston and New York, 1913), 63.

<sup>2</sup>The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. VII (Boston and New York, 1912), 9-10.

<sup>3</sup>Allen Tate, "The Angelic Imagination," in Collected Essays (Denver, 1959), p. 446.

<sup>4</sup>Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness (New York, 1958), p. 143.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Patrick Roppolo, "Meaning and 'The Mask of the Red Death,'" Tulane Studies in English, Vol. XIII (1963), 64.

<sup>6</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography (New York, 1941), pp. 469-70.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

. . . that Poe's dramas of psychic conflict are supported by a definite perspective--a coherent pattern of ideas about art, nature, man, and culture--has encouraged a more confident and disciplined criticism. The charge of moral unconcern, of lack of "heart" and "humanity," in Poe's character and writing, which dominated and distorted Poe criticism before World War I, seems in retrospect, knowing what we know about Poe and his stated artistic purposes, incredibly obtuse and moralistic. Allen Tate has made clear that there is no moral indifference in Poe, but "rather a compulsive, even profound interest in a moral problem of universal concern, the problem of spiritual vampirism."

Eric Carlson's comment in the Preface to The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe sums up what this study has been attempting to demonstrate through an examination of the grotesque: that Poe was essentially a morally serious writer whose fiction, whether good or bad, rendered in imaginative terms a world that offended his intellect, taste, and moral sense, a world that had also humiliated him economically and socially. Having to survive as a popular writer, Poe found it necessary to exploit the taste of what we today call popular culture, and he adopted literary conventions and fictional ploys that satisfied its demands for entertainment. In his gothic fiction, comic extravaganzas, and hoaxes Poe



courted the American public and gave it what it wanted: exaggerations and violence; in a sense, epic similes that implied its own national image. Yet the sound and the fury of that fiction signifies something beyond literary vaudeville and melodrama. Beneath what Carlson calls the "Gothic flummery," there is a moral survey of nineteenth century culture, an implied evaluation of the world represented. Poe grew up in a period dominated by Kantian idealism, evolutionary ideas, and the rationalism of Descartes and Locke. Allegorically, his characters are the embodiment of these ideas taken to extremes; but rarely, if ever, does the heavy hand of didacticism make the reader a captive audience. Poe, always the popular entertainer, either in the gothic or the comic mode, was able to find release for his moral sense in both forms of fictional entertainment. If Poe's first concern was to please, and undeniably it was, the mystification, terror, and humor of the grotesque were the effective tools of his trade. Nevertheless, like so many writers before and after him, Poe was evidently carried beyond his primary intention. The grotesque did serve the purpose of pleasure, but while performing this function, it went on to serve the purpose of instruction.

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## APPENDICES

To force every story that Poe wrote into one of the categories of the grotesque established in this study would be to suggest that Poe wrote his fiction according to some unchanging a priori design. It would be equally absurd to assume that he was wholly aware of his thematic intentions. Few writers are. It need not be argued, however, that Poe was, by and large, a conscious and deliberate artist insofar as the building of plot and the calculation of effect were concerned. His own theories of literature and the recurrent patterns of his fiction offer convincing evidence. The purpose of the Appendices is to offer comment on those stories not examined in any way in the body of the dissertation in order to indicate their tangential relationship to those stories that have. My decision to exclude some of the fiction from the formal categories is based largely on questions of thematic relevance and artistic value. Very often weak stories may appear in the body because they are effective in illustrating the moral function of the grotesque. In other instances, those of better quality are left out because the grotesque never serves the purpose of a moral aesthetic. Occasionally, stories that might seem

appropriate to the formal categories have been omitted because virtually the same themes and ideas have been examined by other fiction in the category. Less than a handful have been completely ignored by any part of this study.

## APPENDIX TO CHAPTER II

"The Domain of Arnheim" (1842), "Landor's Cottage" (1849), "The Island of the Fay" (1841), and "The Philosophy of Furniture," (1843), an essay, are all explorations into the nature of the sublime; but here the quest for the sublime does not set off the processes of the grotesque.

The most arresting piece of the group is "The Domain of Arnheim." The protagonist Ellison partially resembles the Faustian husband in his transcendental sensibilities, but he does not violate another person to obtain his vision. The narrator tells us that "In the widest and noblest sense he was a poet. He comprehended, moreover, the true character, the august aims, the supreme majesty and dignity of the poetic sentiment, the fullest, if not the sole proper satisfaction of the sentiment he instinctively felt to lie in the creation of novel forms of beauty" (p. 606). Ellison, however, as is the case with the Faustian husband, is "tinged with what is termed materialism." He attempts to achieve beauty through "the creation of novel moods of purely physical loveliness." The natural landscape, rather than woman, serves as Ellison's object of the sublime. "Landor's Cottage," subtitled, "A Pendant to the Domain of Arnheim,"

is a factual report of an actual Arnheim rather than an Edenic fantasy, and Poe describes an artist's arrangement of the grounds around Landor's home in terms of the sublime. In "The Island of the Fay" beauty is associated with knowledge, and the natural landscape is presented as a source of the sublime as are Ligeia and Morella: "I love, indeed, to regard the dark valleys, and the gray rocks, and the waters that silently smile, and the forests that sigh in uneasy slumbers, and the proud watchful mountains that look down upon all,--I love to regard these as themselves but the colossal members of one vast animate and sentient whole . . . whose enjoyment is knowledge. . ." (p. 285).

In "The Philosophy of Furniture" the contemplation of the sublime shifts from the natural landscape to man-made artifacts. The essay, in specific, is a commentary on interior decoration, and the English come out ahead of other nations in their ability to cultivate the impression of beauty.



### APPENDIX TO CHAPTER III

"The Oblong Box" (1844), "Thou Art the Man" (1844), and "King Pest" (1835) are playful illustrations of premature burial, but the rich psychological and metaphysical suggestions of the category are never realized.

The condition of premature burial is presented in "The Oblong Box" as the untimely death and burial of a beautiful woman recently married to an artist. Because circumstances force the husband to make a sea journey, despite his wife's sudden death, she is put in a box on board ship while the husband pretends marriage to the maid in order to put the passengers at their ease. The drama of the fiction arises from the narrator's faulty perspective of things, but here the problem of perspective exists only as stage mystification rather than as a meaningful moral and psychological problem artistically rendered by the grotesque. In "Thou Art the Man" a murdered man is placed by the narrator-protagonist in a wine box and delivered to the suspected murderer in order to shock him into a confession. Prior to the burial the narrator stuffs a piece of whale bone down the throat of the corpse and doubles up the body so that it will fly up once the nails that secure the top are removed. The motif

of death and grotesque rebirth is central to the story. A second motif, the use or mutilation of the living or the dead for the purposes of an experiment, brings to mind the stories dealt with in "Alchemical Man," Chapter VI.

A charnel house suggests the motif of premature burial in "King Pest." Two sailors escape from a tavern without paying their bill. Pursued by the landlady, they make their way into part of the city quarantined because of plague. The remainder of the story takes place in the shop of an undertaker, where the protagonists are surrounded by skulls, skeletons, and coffins. Reminiscent of "The Cask of Amontillado," the story establishes a vague connection between wine and death. Beneath the funeral parlor is a wine cellar, and from it wine is brought up to the parlor itself and is drunk in skulls. Another motif of premature burial employed at the end of the story evokes the scene of the whirlpool in "A Descent into the Maelstrom." A hogshead of wine overturns flooding the room from wall to wall: "Jugs, pitchers, and carboys mingled promiscuously in the melee, and wicker flagons encountered desperately with bottles of junk" (p. 729).

## APPENDIX TO CHAPTER V

The largest number of stories in the Appendices suggest the degeneration of man and art into mechanism. Several of them have a decidedly serious intent, but they merely repeat the themes and ideas already examined in the stories of the category. "Hans Pfall" (1838), "The Balloon Hoax" (1844), "Diddling" (1843), "How to Write a Blackwood Article" (1838), "Lionizing" (1835), "Xing a Paragrab" (1849), and "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq." (1842) make up the list.

The first suggestion of mechanism in both "Hans Pfall" and "The Balloon Hoax" comes in the association of the protagonists with man-made apparatus, balloons which carry them away from and back to earth. The former story exploits the image of mechanism more than the latter. In "Hans Pfall" the balloon is made of dirty papers and is in the shape of a fool's cap. The ludicrousness of the apparatus, however, is part of a satiric point of view. The protagonist, a bellows maker, has been driven out of business since fires have begun to be fanned by newspapers that deal with "liberty, long speeches, and radicalism." He escapes from his creditors by taking off in a balloon and

ascending to the moon. "The Balloon Hoax" satirically celebrates the conquest of space and time by a man-made machine, but a note appended to the story indicates that the account is specious. Transcendence by the route of mechanism does not take place or is only partially realized. "Diddling" is much more closely associated with the man-mechanism theme as it exists in the stories of the category. One definition of to diddle presented in Webster's Seventh Collegiate Dictionary is to move with short rapid motions. The term suggests the nature of the mechanistic. The diddler that Poe considers, however, is a hoaxer and a confidence man once again. The list of almost built-in attributes Poe assigns him--interest, perseverance, ingenuity, audacity, nonchalance, originality, impertinence, and grin--creates the impression of a robot who can act on cue.

The remainder of the stories in this appendix satirize art and the literati. The best known piece in the group is "How to Write a Blackwood Article." Here Poe burlesques his own literary formulas and conventions: premature burials, transcendental aspirations, tonal levels, and over-used literary phrases. As a continuation of the burlesque, Poe wrote "A Predicament," another literary parody of the techniques and themes in his more serious fiction. Here, the protagonist, Psyche Zenobia, becomes involved in a series of misadventures, generated by an uncontrollable transcendental impulse, i.e.: "What madness now possessed me? Why

did I rush upon my fate? I was seized with an uncontrollable desire to ascend the giddy pinnacle, and thence survey the immense extent of the city" (p. 347). A gothic building, a gigantic clock with scimitar-like hands, the protagonist's loss of his eye-balls--all these elements Poe incorporates in the story as mechanical contrivances, aesthetic clutter. "Lionizing" is a thrust at literary and intellectual pretentiousness, and the voices of this world furnish the same mindless utterances found in "The Man Who Was Used Up." In response to the protagonist's book on Nosology, the literary world pronounces its judgment, a judgment that is imitative and uniform:

"Wonderful genius!" said the Quarterly.  
 "Superb Physiologist!" said the Westminster.  
 "Clever fellow!" said the Foreign.  
 "Fine writer!" said the Edinburgh.  
 "Profound thinker!" said the Dublin.  
 "Great man!" said Bentley.  
 "Divine soul!" said Fraser.  
 "One of us!" said Blackwood.

"Xing a Paragrab" offers another example of prose as reflex action. An editor called Touch-and-Go Bullet-head invariably inserts the exclamation "Oh" in every sentence of his writing, and his attempt to continue in his style is thwarted by the theft of the letter "O" from the letter case. In order to meet a publishing deadline, the printer is forced to substitute "X" in its place, thus giving the article the quality of something mystical and cabalistic. "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq." attacks the self-styled man of

letters who assumes that literary success is a matter of acquiring the proper literary tools. The father of the protagonist wishes his son to follow in his footsteps as a great writer, and he supplies his son with those tools: "To encourage you in the beginning of things, I will allow you a garret; pen, ink, paper; a rhyming dictionary; and a copy of the Gad-Fly" (p. 323). In all these stories names as signatures, animated prose, abrupt shifts in conversation suggest a wooden, almost inorganic world, where the human is indistinguishable from the mechanical.

## APPENDIX TO CHAPTER VII

"Mystification" (1837), "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (1842), "The Purloined Letter" (1844), and "Bon-Bon" (1837) recall those stories in which there is a confrontation of the Self with the Other. The motifs of mystification remain only components of an ingenious artistic exercise; the tales of ratiocination are thematically slighter versions of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue;" and "Bon-Bon" is another venture into comic diabolism.

In "Mystification" the mysterious presence that usually enters the drama unexpectedly, as though suddenly called upon to perform the offices of the grotesque, appears at the very beginning of the story as the Baron Ritzner Von Jung. To his fellow students he is a man who is utterly unique, but no one can determine just what that uniqueness consists of; he wields a despotic influence over the life of his fellow students, but it is indefinite and unaccountable; he is twenty-one, but he could be taken for fifteen or fifty. The protagonist's sole interest is mystification, but it is merely the means by which he manipulates and controls others. He succeeds in these ends in one special instance; he allows a book that is actually a parody of the duello to fall in the

hands of a rival who refuses to acknowledge his inability to understand it. "Mystification" illustrates one important aspect of the grotesque--the psychological mastery of its victims.

"The Mystery of Marie Roget" and "The Purloined Letter" illustrate once again that only the uncommon man is capable of overcoming the grotesque. In fact the narrator in the first detective story indicates that his sole concern in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is the revelation of the protagonist's character: ". . . I endeavored, about a year ago, to depict some very remarkable features in the mental character of my friend, the Chevalier C. August Dupin. . . . This depicting of character constituted my design . . ." (p. 170). In both stories, Dupin, at the outset, sits in the dark with his companion, the narrator, in a state of mental transport; but two human faculties, one complementing the other, help Dupin succeed where others fail: the Calculus of Probabilities, the rationalist mathematical mind, and empathy, the ability to put oneself in the place of the other.

The only satire in the group is "Bon-Bon," a later version of a very thin story, "The Duc De L'Omelette." As in stories similar to "Bon-Bon," a devil suddenly materializes to plague the protagonist, "a restaurateur of uncommon qualifications" and a metaphysician. Here the satire is directed at philosophical pretensions, and Bon-Bon's physical



qualities, supplying another motif of the grotesque to the story, suggest that he is closer to animal than he is to angel: "If, however, Bon-Bon was barely three feet in height, and if his head was diminutively small, still it was impossible to behold the rotundity of his stomach without a sense of magnificence nearly bordering upon the sublime. In its size both dogs and men must have seen a type of his acquirements--in its immensity a fitting habitation for his immortal soul" (p. 524). Poe ridicules philosophic abstraction by allying it with what is grossly physical.