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THE PRIMITIVE POE:
THE RADICAL AWARENESS OF HIS GOTHIC ART

[ΛΕΥΚΗ ΣΕΛΙΔΑ]

To read Poe's Gothic tales is to visualize madness. It is important to notice that Poe's imagination was primarily sensational, presenting his Gothic world in elaborate visual images and rhetorical rhythms approaching incantations. His Gothic tales are primarily visual and auditory, relying on these senses as the primary avenues to the experience of his art. His is a Lockean world of sensations which inflict themselves upon the *tabula rasa* of his fictional narrators and/or characters in his Gothic tales, that essentially passive mind which can only respond accordingly as victims to pain. The mind, therefore, is trapped within his Gothic boundaries and is unable to initiate any form of withdrawal or transcendence on its own. It is forced to respond to the sensations which hound it unrelentingly. It is this constant and primary attention to sensation and the «programmed» responses to sensation in place of interpretation and explanation that gives Poe his primitive appeal as a writer. This appeal is straightforward and vivid, and his achievement is less successful only in comparison with less parochial writers.

As Lowell, in his famous review of Poe's art in 1845, remarked: "He combines in a very remarkable manner two faculties which are seldom found united: a power of influencing the mind of the reader by the impalpable shadows of mystery, and a minuteness of detail which does not leave a pin or a button unnoticed".[1] Such an attention to detail in Poe's art achieves its particularly Gothic nature both from Poe's particular consciousness of dissolution and his use of the popular Gothic literary mode of his day. Within this fictional mode this obsessive and guilt-ridden consciousness exists in an apocalyptic world beyond the realm of moral "truths" or solutions, dwelling in a continual and unrelenting awareness of the terrors of death, disintegration, and complete loss of the self, Poe focuses in on his visual images with nearly that neurotic sentience of Roderick Usher and the narrator of

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1. James Russel Lowell, <Edgar Allan Poe>, *Graham's Magazine*, 26 (1845), 52.

«The Raven», a closing in on objects that becomes claustrophobic and suffocating in its intensity.

The method of Poe's art is similar to what Nathan A. Scott, Jr., suggests is the rationale behind much contemporary fiction in the manner of Alain Robbe - Grillet: "The principle function of literature must be that of trapping us into a kind of radical amazement at the simple *thereness* of the world".[2] While the reader is always aware of the subjective "elsewhereness", the avoidance of the local, knowable world with which we are most familiar in Poe's fictional realm, he is at the same time aware of the palpable presence of that realm, the oppressive and concrete *thereness* of it. It is a realm carefully constructed by Poe, built upon the seeming autonomy of sensation and scenery above and beyond the fictional character's consciousness. The reader is aware of the effect of these sensations and scenes, so palpably and objectively rendered, upon that character's consciousness, not of that character's conscious effect upon or control over them. The character becomes a victim of the fictional realm Poe has created around him, and the reader shares that experience of entrapment. In a sense art becomes so completely an objective correlative of the fictional character's mind that one often has trouble separating the two, the character from the objects that surround him. Finally in "The Fall of the House of Usher" the collapse of Roderick and the house into the tarn which reflects them both suggests the ultimate "union" of Poe's art a "union" complete in the downward dissolution of both fictional realm and experience.

Poe's enclosed world is rooted inexorably in the radical awareness of his characters; for them the outer world not only reflects but also compounds their own inner sense of constricted space and dwindling personal resources. They are locked in a world which becomes a maze of reflecting and reflected mirrors, each turned toward the other. When one is shattered, they all are shattered and fall in upon themselves. As Robert L. Carringer, in his recent article on Poe's *A. Gordon Pym*, has suggested, "Poe's enclosures suggest his fictional universe of negative possibility and the severely restricted prospects and interests of his protagonists. By the same token, his centers of

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2. Nathan A. Scott, Jr., <The New Mystique of *L'Actuelle:* A View of Cinema in its Relation to our Period-Style>, *Man and the Movies,* ed. by W. R. Robinson, Baltimore, 1969, 207: in text as Scott.

space are physically threatening to his protagonists because the internal condition that they symbolize is also threatening to the protagonist's rational and moral nature".[3] This radical awareness, rooted in the terrors of dissolution both of the world without and the world within, lies at the heart of POE's art.

Each of the pictorial details in POE's fiction and poetry is viewed through the radical awareness of his protagonists. In focusing their attentions on specific details — demonic blue eyes, dark pits, black cats — they focus the reader's attention on their own private obsessions. When one stares at an object for a long period of uninterrupted time, the area around and beyond it begins to blurr and darken. Against such an obscure background the object seems to reign omnipotently in the starer's consciousness. It defies penetration and understanding in a rational sense, for it becomes the physical embodiment of a private and obsessive fixation, divorced from all other objects which may surround it by the constancy of the fixated stare. The radical *thereness* of POE's details rivets our attention, at the same time the mysterious "elsewhereness" of the dark background eludes it.

The protagonist fixes his stare on the object so completely that the object and his own obsession become inseparable from one another. In this suspended state moral and rational values have no meaning, for they are as suspended as the rational and moral mind. The protagonist becomes virtually hypnotized and enters a realm where his looking and the object looked at can no longer be distinguished from each other. Thus POE's Gothic art creates that realm where the radical awareness of his characters defines completely the world that they can see and in which they must operate.

SCOTT continues quoting J. HILLIS MILLER:

> Everywhere the feeling seems to be that, 'instead of making everything an object for the self, the mind must efface itself before reality, or plunge into the density of an exterior world, dispersing itself in a milieu which exceeds and which it has not made'.
>
> (SCOTT, 208)

Feelings of claustrophobia, of being trapped in an eternal present mo-

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3. ROBERT L. CARRINGER, <Circumscription of Space and the Form of POE'S *Arthur Gordon Pym*>, *PMLA* 89 (1974), 510.

ment in time — what Scott, calls "the radical present" (Scott, 210) — often accompany the experience of this radical awareness: "The work of art [is no] longer . . . an instrument of phenomenology, a vehicle of man's self-exploration" but becomes "an 'object'" (Scott, 203). The result suggests a mind numbed by detail and finally unable to separate the physical from the mental, the object from the subject. It is a world in which the mind can be nothing but a Lockean *tabula rasa* at the mercy of sensations from the other world, trapped in its inability to overcome such sensations.

Poe's art embodies these principles of radical awareness. The registration of each detail (we shall discuss below the particular consciousness and Gothic mode through which those details are registered) creates a realm where fantasy and reality become interchangeable, sharing that surreal quality with writers such a Kafka, Nathanael West, Beckett and, in two more recent examples, John Hnawkes and Jerzy Kosihski. This unrelenting presentation of the several savage and primitive experiences — death, revenge, persecution — in that surreal world approximates the ritualistic patterns of ancient myth: the most primitive forms become the most symbolic by their very proximity to the terrible springs of life itself. This may explain why so many of Poe's tales seem to cry out for some elaborate allegorical "decoding". It is on this level within the Gothic and often mechanical trappings of the popular fiction of his day that Poe's art generates its genuine emotional, imaginative and essentially primitive power.

Poe's attention to detail to root his art in what is essentially a primitive experience explains the elaborate versification of his poetry. For him poetry was "the rhythmical creation of beauty;"[4] it was unthinkable to conceive of poetry in other than rhythmical terms as far as its essential form was concerned; meter and argument were one. Such a concern with rhythm has led both Eliot and Lawrence to emphasize Poe's incantatory powers as a poet, to view his verses as hypnotic incantations written to heighten the reader's consciousness to the level of pure sensation where sound alone overcomes the need for sense. The incantatory power itself of Poe's "The Raven", "Ulalume", and "Annabel Lee", to name but a few, provides that primitive depth of feeling and sensation which acute and repetitious rhythm and rhyme

4. Edgar Allan Poe, <The Poetic Principle>, *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe,* Boston, 1956, 470.

can create, "a handling of diction", writes GEOFFREY RAHS, "that is calculated to play upon the nerves rather than the reason, and to penetrate beyond the senses".[5]

POE'S radical awarness is necessarily of a Gothic nature because of his consciousness of dissolution, overwhelming in the terrible accuracies of its darker perceptions, and because of his use of the Gothic literary mode. That literary form certainly reflects his own consciousness, but the two are not necessarily one and the same. We respond to such primitive fears as WORDSWORTH responded to the mountains in "The Prelude", those vast shapes which reflected his own inner sensations passing uncomfortably and fearfully through the underside of his consciousness:

> . . . my brain
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
> There hung a darkness, call it solitude
> Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
> Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
> But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
> Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
> By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.[6]

The reader who admires and celebrates POE usually does so because he responds to the Gothic qualities of his art. As ELIOT recognized in viewing POE as a whole and not merely as a limited artistic craftsman, "We see a mass of unique shape and impressive size to which the eye constantly returns".[7]

Although the terrors of POE'S landscape have often been attributed and derogatorily so to his own emotional immaturity and inability to free himself from childhood fears — EDWARD H. DAVIDSON states, for instance, that "POE's world of the mind was limited to the world of primary sensations and to the terrors which afflict children",[8] and

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5. GEOFFREY RANS, *Poe,* London, 1965, 71; in text as RANS.

6. WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, <The Prelude>, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth,* New York, 1965, 499.

7. T. S. ELIOT, <From POE to VALERY>, *The Hudson Review,* 11 (1949), 327.

8. EDWARD H. DAVIDSON, *Poe: A Critical Study,* Cambridge, 1957, 127; in text as DAVIDSON.

Eliot has commented on the essentially adolescent character of Poe's fantasies — these terrors in a sense are the source of all great art, and their childhood origins do not automatically relegate them to artistic immaturity. It is Poe's mechanical and formulated use of such terrors — a radical awareness undermined by his rational will to bend it to popular standards and to "reason" itself — that raises questions regarding the authenticity and genuiness of his art and vision.

For Poe the will was superior to the intellect in his own cosmological context. Imminent fears of his own dissolution seem to have prevented him from believing in his own imagination entirely. As Althea Hayter suggests:

> He liked to believe himself . . . that he was on ice-cold logician . . . He wanted to believe this, and he needed to believe it, to *fence himself off* frow the abysses within his own mind. (italics mine)[9]
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> He bellieved that he could manipulate horror by logic. It could all be done by *formula*, and his inner self need not be touched, but could stay aloof and safe. (italics mine)
>
> (Hayter, 148)

Because of this need "to fence himself off" in writing his tales, Poe's is a radical awareness which creates its own prison, which remains static and "unsymbolic" finally, and which acknowledges the complete void on the "other side". His art is controlled by his will as his heroes' "adventures" are dictated and controlled by their obsessive wills. His very notion of art as a craft, as a concrete construction of the reason, keeps that reason forever in control of every form of creative activity to the point perhaps of the very "madness" Poe assigned to his characters. Such madness is revealed by its hypersensitive obsession with rational control. The pattern became unbreakable (or may have been from the beginning because of certain psychological tensions) as his intellectual concerns, that need for form to overcome and finally replace initial "experience", hardened into brittle and limited critical beliefs. One could almost accept Davidson's extreme theory — "Poe's breaks through only to the poetic theory that led him to break down the meaning

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9. Althea Hatter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*, Berkeley, 1968, 146; in text as Hatter.

in the first place. Poe ends by talking about poetry, not creating it" (Rans, 108) — were it not for his overlooking the primitive power of much of Poe's art.

In «Metzengerstein» (1832), Poe's first published tale, we are extremely aware of all the borrowed and popular Gothic trappings which he has used — the horse and tapestry, the plot of revenge, the world of castles, and the German backdrop where Gothicism had its beginnings. He himself is parodying the Gothic mode at this point, a sort of "trial run" perhaps before his own solid achievement in the form.

In "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) both Poe's method and technique are more clearly revealed. The "masque" of the title refers to both the allegorical figure of death in the tale and the allegorical framework of the tale, but it also refers to the older traditions of the masque itself, of art as a theatrical performance. Art here becomes a "dumb show", an entertainment to pass the time until death arrives, a very richly detailed but finally meaningless tapestry erected grandly to avoid death but which crumbles at the mere entrance of that hooded shroud. The only hero is the conqueror worm. Beyond the black velvet tapestries and scarlet panes of Gothic windows lurks a nihilism unprecedented in most American literature of the nineteenth century.

Poe's saving grace for art, its meaning for him, seems to lie in his power to will it into being in the face of certain death. Art becomes a sheer act of the will, for "man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will", as Poe begings "Ligeia" (1838). Art embodies a sense of order which demands an impersonal and rigorous control over all things; the fictional realm becomes closed and circular allowing "progression" only in the form of a collapse into nothingness. Poe believes in the romantic quest of his day but only insofar as it leads to the grave. The effect of his art succeeds in cutting off any possibility of growth or consciousness save that toward dissolution.

Perhaps Poe's tales and poems can best be described as psychic allegories, objective correlatives which represent and reflect a particular state of mind or emotion. They remain therefore monochromatic and the characters are trapped in certain predetermined and therefore doomed patterns of experience. As Robbe - Grillet, in his discussion of the new novel, suggests:

> To identify in this way my own melancholy with that which I attribute to a landscape (One is re-

> minded here of Poe's "House of Usher"), to admit this link as more than superficial, is thereby to acknowledge a certain predestination for my present life: this landscape existed *before* me; if it is really the landscape which is sad, it was *already* sad before me, and this correspondance I experience today between its form and my mood were here waiting for me long before I was born; this melancholy has been fated for me forever.[10]

Each creation becomes an imitation of true feeling; we do not question the authenticity of that feeling, though its transformation into a set and stock fictional "pose" alerts us to the excessive limitations of Poe's art. It is the repetitious imitation, the constant transformation of genuine feeling into conceptualized fictional form from which it never again emerges, which we question.

"The Pit and the Pendulum" (1843) can be seen as one of these psychic allegories, a description of the relationship between the mind and the world in Poe's realm and as a faithful rendition of the mind's bout with approaching madness. In such an analysis the pit becomes the mind, that bottomless *tabula rasa* which exists solely to receive outside sensations, the swings of the descending pendulum. The world closes in on the protagonist precisely as his senses "open out", and as they become more acute, the more he is enveloped by exterior forces. The protagonist's idea that the pendulum has "*descended*" (Poe's italics) is linked with the "*hissed*" (Poe's italics) sound which has increased. The sense of hearing is equated by Poe, and carefully by the italicized words which he emphasizes, to the feeling of claustrophobia and entrapment: the more acute one's senses, the more acute one's awareness of death and dissolution. In the end the outside world and the world of the psyche are indistinguishable. The protagonist is rescued arbitrarily by the "*revolution*" of the mind's circular pattern (again the word itself is italicized early by Poe to suggest the pattern of the tale) from sanity — "I felt that my senses were leaving me" — to the brink of insanity — "I felt that I tottered upon the brink - I averted my eyes" — to the return to momentary sanity once again — "The

10. Alain Robbe - Grillet, *For a New Nobel: Essays on Finction,* New York, 1965, 56.

fiery walls rushed back! An out-stretched arm caught my own".

The circularity of "The Pit and the Pendulum", the complete incestuous infiltration and reflection of mind and matter, reveals that the mind in Poe's world can finally know nothing. It can only be present at its own demise, active in creating its fall into madness, passive in watching that fall complete itself. The physical world can only melt into nothingness; metaphor cannot rescue it from oblivion. The seven tall candles in the tale are seen at first with an "aspect of charity", then as "white slender angels", but they rapidly deteriorate into "meaningless spectres" and sink "into nothingness". The physical world remains essentially impenetrable. The mind, reduced to Locke's *tabula rasa*, can only react to the sensations inflicted upon it by a reality forever external and forever unknowable.

Poe's characters are essentially similar, whether in the guise of Roderick Usher, William Wilson, the narrator of "The Raven" (1845), the narrator of "Ulalume" (1847), or Dupin the detective. Such a set and formulated attitude or consciousness (depending upon Poe's seriousness at the time) contains within it no possibility of artistic development unless it be abandoned altogether. Poe's melancholy *persona* can increase his sense of worldly *ennui* and alienation resulting in the acts of revenge in "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), and "The Black Cat" (1843); he can degenerate into a form of self-parody and grotesque humor in "Hop-Frog" (1849); or he can experience complete dissolution in "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) and "The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym" (1838). In any case the development of such a *persona* is fairly narrow and limited. It is no wonder that Poe's art becomes increasingly solipsistic and fragments entirely or settles down to a set tone and manner. It is not necessary that such limitations be imposed automatically because of the nature of Poe's created heroes, although we could argue that this is the ultimate result; it became necessary because of Poe's own limitations toward his art, limitations that finally relegate his work to a far less important stature in American literature than Hawthorne's or Melville's.

"The Raven", "Ulalume", and "The Fall of the House of Usher" reveal those aspects of Poe's art which we have been discussing. Both "The Raven" and "Ulalume" reveal Poe's incantatory powers as Eliot has pointed out; both appeal to the primitive strain of heavily accentuated rhythms and rhymes; both deal with minds in a state of dissolution or agitation; and both finally reveal the impenetrability of the physical

world. "The Fall of the House of Usher" displays its radical awareness in its landscape complete with brooding madness and decay, and in the total collapse at the end of the tale we witness the narrator's vivid destruction of a reality about him which he has been unable to penetrate fully. Only the void remains, the empty hollow of an impotent ego that has fed upon and consumed itself.

"The Fall of the House of Usher", the triumph of Poe's art, contains his most fully created setting, a complete interweaving of character, atmosphere, and sense of place. Reality and illusion overlap one another, are mirror images of each other's reflections: Roderick and Madeline Usher, the house and the tarn, the "Mad Trist" and Madeline's "appearance", the narrator and Roderick, Roderick and Ethelred. Everything complements everything else "in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn", and the tale is as much a technical triumph as Henry James' *Turn of the Screw*. "The sentience of all vegetable things" is complete. Both the narrator and Roderick suffer from a "morbid acuteness of the senses", a suffocating awareness of detail and terrible nuance which traps them in the agony of the ever-present moment and reflects the growing madness of each. When details overwhelm the senses, when a separate sense of self is lost and/or sacrificed to such an awareness, madness can be the only result in a Poe story. The narrator objects to the "too concrete reveries" of Fuseli's painting and yet conjures up the most concrete reverie in the tale, Madeline's "escape" from the vault.

Roderick Usher is mad, but his madness is perceived by the narrator who himself seems to be undergoing mental disintegration. It follows according to Poe's craft that, as G. R. Thompson suggests, "Usher is emblematical of the narrator's state of mind". Thompson, however, develops this basic idea further:

> The weird events . . . are psychological delusions on the part of the narrator's, delusions so subtly insinuated that the reader tends to see only from the narrator's point of view even though he *announces his madness,* or nervousness, or terror, or some oddity or another that should cause the reader to pause for a moment to consider his distorted or

> eccentric view of the events he narrates. (italics mine)
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> (THOMPSON, 36)[11]

THOMPSON concludes his argument by defining POE'S technique as a "deceptive, ironic, psychological realism, in which the reader must read the clues as a detective in a mystery story" (THOMPSON, 44). Surely the "announced madness" of the narrator can be discovered if one pays close attention to the text. The man recognizes that "a sense of insufferable gloom *pervaded* my spirit"; he is unable to "grapple with the shadowy fancies that *crowded* upon me"; he feels that "by slow *yet certain degrees,* the wild influences of his (Usher's) own fantastic yet impressive superstitions" are "creeping upon me"; and in his separate bedchambers he struggles in vain "to reason off the nervousness which had *dominion over me* (All italics mine)". Such nervousness he assigns to the furniture of the room, an act of identification and "sentience" which parallels Usher's own, and "at length, there sat upon my very heart an incubus of *utterly causeless alarm* (italics mine)". The narrator comments on Roderick's acute sense of hearing; yet it is he (the narrator) who first hears Madeline's approach: "I leaped to my feet; but the measured rocking movement of Usher was undisturbed". It is the narrator who may have increased Usher's disintegration by infecting him with his own as Chillingworth infected and finally "captured" the soul of Dimmesdale: ". . . a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit".

Critics have discussed the narrator's exclusion from Usher's dilemma: he is excluded ONLY in his having survived the collapse of the house and the death of Usher himself. The narrator has been called a witness to madness, and yet if he too is mad, as seems to be the case, by what motives is he possessed to tell his tale and separate himself from Usher's tragedy? If Usher's madness is not merely but very obviously an extension of the narrator's own, then isn't the narrator destroying his characters and setting, his mirror-haunted world completely in order to attempt to extricate himself from his own mad actions, his own known complicity in Usher's death? Couldn't the collapse of Usher's house be a reflection of the collapse of his own mind?

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11. G. R. THOMPSON, <"Proper Evidence of Masness": American Gothic and the Interpretation of "Ligeia">, *Emerson Society Quarterly,* 18 (1972), 44; in text as THOMPSON.

There seems to be no rescue from the pit in this instance.

Much depends on the celebrated fissure in the house which the narrator describes at the beginning as if to foreshadow the inevitable collapse which is to follow, yet it remains strangely indefinite and uncertain, another figment of or reflection of the narrator's own psychosis? The narrator explains, "*Perhaps* the eye of a scrutinizing observer *might have* discovered a *barely perceptible* fissure" (italics mine), but the words "perhaps", "might have", and "barely perceptible" may indicate the uncertainty of the narrator's awareness of the actual environment. Poe, being the carefully crafted and crafty artist that he was, certainly did not employ these words unknowingly. When the collapse of the house into the tarn does occur, the fissure is defined as that "of which I have before spoken" giving it a more reliable and "steadier" reality as if forgetting the fact that his first mention of it was remarkably indefinite. It is as if the narrator is substituting it so makes it so — in place of the initial uncertainty of his original perception. The objective world becomes indistinguishable from his mind's perception and creation of it. The mind sees, incorporates what it sees, and then can never distinguish itself from what is seen.

What was suggested has become actual by the narrator's mere mentioning it so. Uncertain perceptions have become firm and concrete details, so much so that the narrator can escape such imprisonment and end his tale only by destroying the reality around him entirely. All MUST collapse into the tarn, that final dwelling place of Poe's art. Like Ishmael the narrator himself alone remains to tell of strange events. However, an identification with Ishmael in Melville's book both in his ultimate concern for humanity and in his genuine pursuit of knowledge allows us to accept his story. The same is not true here and thus leaves room for noticeable and tantalizing doubts.

The narrator of "Ulalume" is not so fortunate. He cannot overcome the impenetrable world by burying it so easily; he is drawn to it inevitably and succumbs to the knowledge of physical dissolution which in no way can be transcended or understood. With the knowledge that Ulalume is no more, a knowledge he has been keeping from himself, the elaborate images of the poem collapse into meaninglessness in the same way that we have seen in "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Pit and the Pendulum". The fact of death and the fact of the poet's consistent and unrelenting sense of loss remain unchanged. Brought sharply into focus these facts puncture the contrived allegory that the poem is at-

tempting to create and let it collapse into a nebulous suggestion of Hell's interference with reality. The conclusion suggests that poetry itself is an interference with fact; it remains an illusion, something that can exist only when the facts are not known, only when the knowledge of death, the experience of loss, and the existence of memory are blotted out entirely, kept separate from the vague meanderings of the poetic sensibility. Psyche and the poet suppress or ignore all knowledge in their stroll through the ghoul-haunted woodland and once restored to it at Ulalume's tomb (as Psyche has warned the poet), they question only the source of the "nebulous lustre" which led them there. If the source of poetic inspiration is proved to be not heavenly but demonic, the fact remains that the guiding light has revealed only the fact of death or more precisely the memory of the effect of death upon the poet. Here the poet stops. He has travelled from "we knew not" to "I know, now", not by way of or because of the poem but in spite of it.

"Ulalume" separates art from its source. Death underlies all things; here it overwhelms the pre-fabricated imagery of the poet's mind. The poem does not embody the reality; it is created by the poet to avoid it, to substitute some airy allegory for it. When the poet "knows" the truth, the images collapse; the whole paper showcase of Umber and Weir and Yaanek is deprived completely of any ultimate meaning or value. To "know" completely makes art unnecessary or makes of it a cardboard dreamland, a vista of *papier maché*. Emily Dickinson descends into oblivion when she "finished knowing, then".[12] Poe is left believing fully in the fact of knowing (in the limited Lockean sense) and can do nothing with it but lament that sad and indestructible knowledge of Ulalume's death. As Davidson concludes, "The poem has therefore investigated the incapacity of poetry or of the imagination to do anything with or go beyond whatever the chaotic world of sense presents. The symbolic activity can do nothing, for everything is external to the self; and so the drama of the poem is all in terms of an objectified reality of which Psyche or the imagination is fully aware but which the rational 'I' refuses to acknowledge until the end" (Davidson, 96). We are left with a "pictorial masquerade", (Davidson, 93) a procession of images which can mean anything they would like to mean (Poe's acknowledged desire for sound over sense is here ap-

12. Emily Dickinson, <I Felt a Funeral in my Brain>, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Boston, 1960, 129.

parent, for instance in the word "immemorial"). Poetry has become merely the "spectre of a planet/From the limbo of lunary souls", a ghost of its former self, a carefully illuminated but hollow replica or mere illusion. It does not embody; it embalms, and the hollowness of its conceptualized imagery crumbles at the first sight of "reality".

If the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" creates his own reality both to escape from real horrors and to destroy it finally to extricate himself from it, and if the narrator of "Ulalume" remains paralyzed before it, the narrator of "The Raven" succumbs to its ceaseless torment. In "The Raven" Poe's inability to create the symbolic reality of art becomes a masochistic exercise in self-destruction, that self-flagellation to which the romantic artist, unable to extricate himself from the isolation of his finely-wrought fictions, is heir. The physical world, that object which remains external to the poet's own sensibilities (the raven), remains intact and impenetrable: "The inanimate objects, bird and bust, stare out in triumphant rigidity" (Davidson, 92). The words do not image but seem to be chosen for their superficial decorousness. As Joseph Chiari states, "The words . . . are used as instruments to create certain effects, and at times as isolated jewels".[13] The poem reflects the idea of flagellation and self-inflicted guilt and remorse which Poe wishes to create, but does not embody it. "The result is idea-emotion and a kind of rhetoric which is . . . hollow" (Chiari, 112). The incantatory effect remains primary, sacrificing content to form yet producing that primitive and simplistic order of rhythm and rhyme that cannot be easily forgotten.

The raven is obviously the objective correlative of the poet's remorse. Whether it is an hallucination or an actual raven remains immaterial; it still exists externally as a specific image in the poem, and that is the problem of Poe's art. That objectified reality becomes external to the poet as a theory or concept of art is external to art itself. The raven "freezes" as an object of psychic allegory from which there is no development, no escape. There is literally nowhere to go, unless to the ultimate dissolution of all things. The poet's pleas for enlightenment are useless; there can be no pursuit of "the mysteries" implied in the symbolic reality of art, for the concept behind the idea or image remains frozen into place. The quest can become only the repetition of

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13. Joseph Chiari, *Symbolisme from Poe to Mallarme*, New York, 1970, 112; in text as Chiari.

self-inflicted agony. Whether the bird is "bird or devil", whether the "nebulous lustre" in "Ulalume" is sent from heaven or hell, remains academic and unknowable. All that can be witnessed by the reader is the dissolution of the narrator who asks such questions. Poe's art finally imprisons the spirit, driving curiosity and the pursuit of self-knowledge into the bottomless pit of unrelieved madness. And every hero trapped in Poe's labyrinths must finally admit that "my soul from out that shadow that lirs floating on the floor/Shall be lifted nevermore".

And yet the incantatory power of Poe's art cannot be denied, for in this he succeeded. It is this power of incantation in his poetry and the power of surreal detail in his prose, coupled with the Gothic consciousness of Poe's heroes (and Poe himself) through which the incantation and details are experienced, that give his art its primitive and emotive effect, and "effect" is precisely the stated goal of Poe's art. Concepts and contraptions cannot bleed, but in their detailed and decorous palpability they can be made to fascinate and hypnotize. The final spell which such an art produces embodies that total effect upon the reader's sensibilities which Poe sought to the exclusion of nearly everything else. His method solidified early and arrested his development as a writer, but the contours of his fictional realm and of the terrifying and terrified consciousness which broods upon it combine to haunt and hold anyone who comes within its spell. Perhaps that incantatory spell is the next best thing to being there.

Σπουδαστήριο Ἀγγλικῆς Γλώσσας
καὶ Φιλολογίας

SAMUEL COALE*

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