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ELH, Vol. 37, No. 2. (Jun., 1970), pp. 245-262.

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POE AND THE POWERS OF THE MIND

BY ROBERT SHULMAN

In his best fiction Poe achieves acute insights into the mysteries, processes, and terrors of the human personality without draining our shared inner life of its basic mystery. After all the attacks and denigration, after all the emphasis on his dubious metaphysics or even more unfortunate personal pathology, we can still go to Poe's fiction for illumination that writers of a more psychologically sophisticated era are oddly handicapped from providing. In Poe criticism that usually implies bad news—more necrophilia and incest, more maternal deprivation and twisted sex. But by stressing Poe's concern with the powers of the mind and the situation of the poet, I want to recall attention to some of the other psychological and intellectual matters that make Poe a living force.

The most interesting Poe criticism of the last decade has established that Poe's aesthetics and cosmology are central to an understanding of his fiction and poetry. I propose to reverse the usual recent emphasis and, while taking Poe's theory seriously into account, to emphasize the psychological revelations of the fiction. Whereas the usual psychological study of Poe treats the fiction as an unconscious manifestation of the author's problems or as an unconscious confirmation of orthodox Freudian categories, it seems to me that in his best stories Poe has a genuine understanding of unconscious processes and imaginative powers.¹ In the psychological criticism, Poe often emerges as a rather bedraggled victim of tendencies he failed to understand. My view, however, is that in much of his fiction Poe had unusual insight into often obscure mental processes and that, although he may not have grasped consciously all the implications—what human being ever does?—for purposes of his art he had remarkable

¹ The classical psychological study of Poe is Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Study* (London, 1949). Although it is too rigid in many ways, Marie Bonaparte's book is sensitive to basic impulses in Poe's imagination and seems to me to deserve renewed attention, in contrast to David M. Rein, *Edgar A. Poe: The Inner Pattern* (New York, 1960).

understanding and control. Before trying to develop this view, however, since Poe has a consciously formulated theory of the mind, we must first consider the bearing of that theory on his imaginative understanding of our complex inner life.

In his Longfellow review (1842) and "The Poetic Principle" (1846 ff.)—the more revealing fiction will come later—Poe divides the mind into the three faculties of Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense.² Taste, we recall, is the most important faculty, since it does not deal with Truth or moral values but with Beauty and finally with that ideal, supernal Beauty, Unity, and Perfection that, on Poe's view, man and the universe originated in and have since fallen away from into the multiplicity, disintegration, and "state of progressive collapse" we now know.³ Eventually the universe will disintegrate, Poe argues in *Eureka*, personal identity will be lost, but, more than compensating for this "inevitable annihilation" (XVI, 186), the original, Divine Beauty, Life, and Unity will prevail. In the meantime, under the guidance of Taste, by rearranging earthly forms and through suggestive imagery and music, poetry can begin to satisfy our inborn thirst for this eternal Beauty and Divine Perfection. By exciting our souls, Taste and the poem can elevate us and give us the insight we crave, the vision of eternity, the vision of an eternal realm of Beauty and Unity superior to anything we can know on earth.

Poe's landscape essays are allegories on this view of the mind and universe; or rather, on those phases emphasizing poetic beauty, not annihilation and collapse. It is no wonder, then, that "The Domain of Arnheim" and the others have found few readers, just as it is fortunate if symptomatic that there is such a split between the emphasis on Beauty and Perfection in Poe's theory, particularly his critical theory, and the emphasis on darker qualities in his best fiction.⁴ For Poe, through the soul-exciting

² The development of Poe's critical theory is traced by Marvin Laser, "The Growth and Structure of Poe's Concept of Beauty," *ELH*, 15 (1948), 69-84. See also George Kelly, "Poe's Theory of Beauty," *American Literature*, 27 (1956), 521-536 and "Poe's Theory of Unity," *PQ*, 37 (1958), 34-44; and Joseph J. Moldenhauer, "Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections Between Poe's Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision," *PMLA*, 83 (1968), 284-297.

³ Edgar Allan Poe, *Eureka*, in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison (New York, 1902), XVI, 300. My quotations from Poe are from the Harrison edition and the citations will appear in the text.

⁴ Poe has a marked tendency to compartmentalize his interests and insights, and although the deepest personal sources of this tendency are outside our present con-

elevation of Taste and the poem—or what unpredictably amounts to the same thing, through the terrifying catastrophe of death and annihilation—for Poe the highest aim of the self and the universe is to lose individuality and multiplicity, to go beyond the nature and life we know, and to become one with the Divine Unity and Beauty. That Poe has intensely mixed feelings about this process is suggested by the discrepancy between the dominant tone and revelations of most of his fiction and the dominant tone and emphasis of his theoretical pieces.

One example out of many is that, although Poe frequently mentions the elevated soul striving for Loveliness, his explicit critical theory does not take account of his major contribution to fiction, his imaginative understanding of the self, creating and suffering under the pressure of obsession, hatred, and dread. Poe's cosmological theory, to select another example, stresses disintegration as a prelude to Unity with Divine Beauty, but, although obsession and madness are types of disintegration, the more general and philosophical terms conceal much of what is actually going on in stories like "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Masque of the Red Death." Poe's vocabulary and concepts disguise much of his actual accomplishment. To be even more specific, and to return to our starting point, Poe's model of the mind in his critical essays allows no place at all for a depth dimension, no provision for what the tarn, the abyss, and the dark, hidden chambers in his fiction suggest—that realm associated, not with supernal Beauty but with conflict, chaos, hostility, and fear, the depths his power comes from, much as Poe would like it otherwise and prettier.⁵

A case in point is "The Masque of the Red Death," often admired for its suggestive atmosphere and formal unity or as

cern, we should note that Poe regarded poetry as superior to and more refined than prose, so that he was apparently liberated to explore in detail in his prose fiction material he felt was unworthy of poetry and which he did not choose to discuss explicitly in his theoretical work. Nina Baym, "The Function of Poe's Pictorialism," *SAQ*, 65 (1964), 46-54, also concentrates on the split between Poe's theory and practice.

⁵ Poe develops his model of the mind—Intellect, Taste, the Moral Sense—in his review of Longfellow's "Ballads and Other Poems," *Graham's Magazine*, April, 1842. The faculty of perversity, first mentioned in "The Black Cat" a year later (August 19, 1843), is never assimilated into Poe's developed poetics. His summary statement of his mature poetics, "The Poetic Principle" (1846 ff.), uses the same three faculties as the Longfellow review.

evidence that Poe was impelled to imagine ultimate annihilation, even that of an entire community, or as evidence that death is merely a prelude to a not undesirable union with Divine process and perfection.⁶ The story is more immediately an allegory on Poe's scheme of the mind—he published "The Red Death" a month after his Longfellow review—and from the start it suggests Poe's dissatisfaction with that faculty of Taste his theory would lead us to expect him to present sympathetically. Prince Prospero, as his name indicates, represents one style of artist and imaginative man, the embodiment of one style of Taste, apparently frolic but actually terrified of impending madness. His magnificent palace, a variant on "The Haunted Palace" of the mind and the House itself in "The Fall of the House of Usher," is "the creation of the prince's own eccentric yet august taste" (IV, 250). It is absolutely isolated from the rest of the world and from the other faculties of the mind; in this secluded palace, "it was folly to grieve, or to think" (IV, 251), which are for the Moral Sense and Intellect.

Poe has real insight into that basically irrational strategy by which the mind attempts to preserve itself from its own forces of madness, disease, and disintegration by rigidly isolating itself and by assuming that the threat is external when in fact it is internal. This poetic mind, ostensibly given over to pleasure and Beauty, is actually given over to what it fears most, to those "sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within" (IV, 251) which, because of the unbreakably bolted doors, can neither escape nor originate in the outside world.

The dark labyrinth of the mind, excluded from Poe's formal theory, is richly (and perhaps overrichly) represented in the story by those irregular chambers of the mind, lighted not by the natural sun but by flickering torches filtered through dark Gothic windows and emblematic of the prince's strange imagination—some "thought him mad" (IV, 253). The prince's "own guiding taste" had decorated the bizarre interior of the palace and had also "given character to the masqueraders" who "stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams" (IV, 254), through these lurid chambers. The protagonist is understandably threatened by the

⁶ See, e. g., R. W. B. Lewis, *Trials of the Word* (New Haven, 1965), p. 207 and Joseph P. Rappolo, "Meaning and 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" in *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1967), pp. 134-144.

black clock of mortality and impending decay. In the inmost recess of his palace, the prince finally confronts the one fear he had refused to admit—Poe often takes a phrase or figure of speech literally—and Poe brings to a climax his suggestive allegory on the decay, madness, and disintegration of a mind exclusively given over to Taste; increasingly terrified of insanity, decay, and death; and altogether shut up in its own concerns and processes. Where Hawthorne might deal with the morality of isolation, Poe achieves remarkable insights into the irrational defenses of the mind, and into irrationality itself. In his imaginative work, even when he is deliberately using his formal model of the mind, Poe does not confine himself within the limits of that theory but suggests processes that, though they may originate in his personal preoccupations, have a disturbing and revealing general relevance.

“The Masque of the Red Death” suggests that we might stay alert to Poe’s tendency to be ambivalent about, to disguise, and to vary his treatment not only of the concerns he stresses in his theory but also in his fiction. We should not be surprised that a writer with Poe’s imaginative understanding of the ordinarily concealed recesses and powers of the mind and universe should in his fiction emphasize ordinarily suppressed emotions, processes, and terrors or that he should to some extent conceal what he was revealing, as he does in “The Masque of the Red Death” (originally published as “The Mask of the Red Death”), or that he should seek to imagine more satisfying alternatives, as he does in the critical and landscape essays, some of the poems, and parts of *Eureka*. The problem for criticism is to understand and evaluate the results.

One major tendency in recent Poe criticism is to reconcile the serious differences in emphasis within and between Poe’s theory and fiction by assigning priority to his aesthetic and religious values and by stressing them in interpreting the imaginative work.⁷ The comic and satiric pieces aside, however, Poe’s fiction

⁷ See, e. g., Moldenhauer; Rappolo; Kermit Vanderbilt, “Art and Nature in ‘The Masque of the Red Death,’” *NCF*, 22 (1968), 379-389; Richard Wilbur, “Edgar Allan Poe,” in *Major Writers of America*, ed. Perry Miller (New York, 1962), I, 373-380 and “The Poe Mystery Case,” *NYRB*, 9 (July 13, 1967), 16, 25-28; Joseph M. Garrison, Jr., “The Function of Terror in the Works of Edgar Allan Poe,” *AQ*, 18 (1966), 136-150; and Edward Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).

succeeds to the extent that he can suggestively, precisely, and intensely illuminate the interior of the self, the powers and processes of the mind—and frequently the destructive and irrational powers. The stories can have profound implications for the universe, as in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” but they are less successful when the emphasis is almost exclusively cosmological, as in “The Conversation of Charmion and Eiros,” or when Poe relies almost exclusively on melodramatic atmosphere, as in “The Assigination,” so that his ability to probe inner states is not also called into play. The melodramatic trappings designed to suggest depth, mystery, and obscurity are not a major distraction when, instead of being a substitute for profundity, the depths are in fact explored, as in “The Masque of the Red Death.”

Poe often seeks to find metaphoric equivalents for his explicit theoretical concerns—with identity and oneness in unexpected guises, with the importance of analogy, with the life and death power of writing and art to stimulate supernatural and finally fatal visions, with the terror and awe of moving from life to death to a strange afterlife or of swooning and awakening to strange perceptions, novel sensations, and “to the verge of some stupendous psychal discoveries.”⁸ In a typical story, through the swooning or dizziness of the protagonist and through symbolic setting—a journey to the interior of foggy, secluded ravines or the dark, inner chamber of a castle or the hold of a ship—Poe organizes a series of episodes to suggest his main theoretical concerns and to establish unconventional states of mind in which ordinary reason and common-sense are superseded and strange mergings, suggestions, and discoveries can occur. “The setting of a Poe story,” as a recent critic says, “is not an external world at all, but the world of imagination made substantial for the purpose of coming to know it better.”⁹

But in contrast to “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” or “The Cask of Amontillado,” in his lesser works—“A Tale of the Ragged Mountain,” “The Premature Burial,” or “Morella,” for example—Poe’s revelations about the

⁸ “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains,” V, 174. For Poe’s account of his experiments with the state between waking and sleeping, see the *Marginalia* for March, 1846, XVI, 87-90.

⁹ Baym, p. 47.

interior of the self and the powers of the mind are relatively generalized and tame, relatively less precise, less profound, and less intense than in his major fiction. One ravine is very much like another, ten swoons are not necessarily more suggestive than one, and Poe, as he is always tempted to do, relies heavily on mechanical conceits, strained effects, and overinsistent rhythms and rhymes. Although they illuminate facets of Poe's aesthetic and cosmological theory, stories like "A Tale of the Ragged Mountain" and "Morella" do not pass beyond the possibility or "verge of some stupendous psychal discoveries." In his more successful work, however, the "discoveries" are precisely and suggestively explored, often through Poe's strategy of sustaining tension between an ordered prose and an irrational subject matter or of dealing in a meticulously organized story with the powers of chaos and disintegration, or through Poe's ability to imagine and bring to fictional life his major symbols—the abyss, the darkened chambers, the teeth and eyes that animate much of his best work.

Perhaps the most significant pattern in Poe's career is that he developed the ability and technical control during the late 1830's and early 1840's to probe sharply those inner states and powers he had earlier suggested only quite generally and "philosophically." The contrast between "MS Found in a Bottle" (1833) and "A Descent into the Maelstrom" (1841) is an example of this tendency. When, as in many of the stories of 1844, Poe reverts to more generalized fiction related in theme and tone to his theoretical views, the quality declines, as the contrast between "The Tell-Tale Heart" (Jan., 1843) and "Mesmeric Revelation" (Aug., 1844) illustrates. Since the development of Poe's fiction is often overlooked, these changes in approach and quality are worth stressing to counter the impression that for all practical purposes the stories were written at the same time and that they can be best appreciated from the perspective of Poe's consciously articulated theory.

We must now turn to some major stories to suggest how, in ways his theory disguises or overlooks, Poe does in practice sustain precise, revealing insights into the powers of the mind and universe. He has, for example, a well-known ability to dramatize our latent powers of hostility and the destructive, cruelly punitive impulses which animate the recesses of the mind and which find

their proper symbolic setting and enactment in “the inmost recesses of the catacombs” (VI, 171) in “The Cask of Amontillado.” Less well-known but equally revealing are the insights into the destructive powers of hostility, drinking, and thwarted creativity Poe dramatizes in “Hop-Frog.”

In one of modern literature’s most moving versions of the tortured, alienated artist, Hop-Frog, jester to the King, is presented as a deformed dwarf and cripple, a stranger in the midst of other men, marked off from them by his foreign origins, his suffering, his talent, and his deformities. Hop-Frog’s crippled movements, excessive sensitivity to wine, and rebellious subservience to his public further constitute an early portrait of the literary man as a drunk and an unwilling toady—hop, frog—those two guises for the artist that in the century to follow will be repeated again and again both sympathetically and hostilely. Hop-Frog, at the mercy of his employer, suffers indignities, watches his lady friend being callously abused, and, despite his protests, is forced first to drink the two glasses of wine he cannot stand and then to satisfy his employer’s demand for “invention,” for “characters,” for “something novel—out of the way” (VI, 219). In thus suggesting a relation between drinking and writing, Poe places the blame for the drinking outside, on the cruel demands of the public, so that from Poe’s point of view the account is self-excusing and partly true (the damage his own drinking did his wife is reflected and deflected by having the King throw the wine in the companion’s face). More profound and fully dramatized is Poe’s insight into the dynamics of destructive hostility and thwarted creativity, into the impulses the wine releases and allows Hop-Frog to express.

Poe shows that Hop-Frog’s powerless subservience to his public is combined with thwarted creative power, represented partly by the powerful teeth, arms, and chest above the crippled legs. The image of the parrot’s beak grating remorselessly against its cage, the harsh noise dominating the entire chamber, is one major symbol of the resulting hatred, frustration, and threatening, aggressive contempt the caged artist turns against those who have degraded him into a parrot, no nightingale or raven. The cruel noise dominates the final scene of awful revenge and turns out to be the grating of Hop-Frog’s fang-like teeth, so that beak and teeth, in other contexts perhaps suggestive of masculine crea-

tive power, here further our insight into creative energies thwarted and turned to destructive uses.

"Inspired" by the wine, Hop-Frog turns to new uses an old story by Froissart and, with their own consent, by tarring and feathering King and court, chaining them, and dressing them as apes, he makes a monkey of his public as he feels they have made a parrot of him. In another of Poe's Gothically darkened chambers of the mind, Hop-Frog, "with the rapidity of thought" (VI, 216), then illuminates the mind's destructive powers in his terrifying final action. At the climax, the chamber's one source of light, the lamp, traditional symbol of imaginative creativity, becomes an implement of vicious torture and the abused, caged victim has been goaded into inhuman, all-too-human victimizer. For those who cannot separate the story from their knowledge of Poe's life and death, perhaps the most painful turn is the sense that, whatever the origins in Poe's drinking, imaginative blocking, and difficulty in writing, whatever the actual tangle of rights and wrongs, one of our most gifted writers was impelled at the end of his life to image his career in just this way. The final pathos for "the imagination at play," as Terence Martin puts it in another context, is that at the end Poe "imagines our death."¹⁰

Our immediate concern, however, is with the center of Poe's artistic achievement, his ability to understand imaginatively the darker and sometimes the creative powers of the human mind, as he does in "A Descent into the Maelstrom." In this story and in Poe's fiction generally, the dominant powers are most often the inner and outer forces of chaos and irrationality. At the climax of "A Descent," however, just as the protagonist is about to be destroyed in the whirlpool, the counter forces of reason and imagination do help save him from that abyss of existence which also suggests the chaotic depths of the mind. Freudians might more particularly identify the smooth, funnel-like whirlpool with an entry through the mother-sea into the womb, an entry the protagonist is intensely curious about but which he also fears will destroy him until he finally emerges from this chaotic region of death and birth, a changed, suddenly aged new man. Certainly the rhythms of near death and a precarious new birth are involved, but the impulse toward and away from the womb is not the only revelation in this exploration of the depths. As

¹⁰ "The Imagination at Play: Edgar Allan Poe," *KR*, 28 (1966), 209.

another part of Poe's drama of mental powers, through luck, observation, reasoning, and above all a flash of intuition, the protagonist, we recall, is saved from inner and outer chaos. Since Charles Feidelson has emphasized that the loss of personal identity is often the price Poe's narrators pay for the "exciting knowledge" they crave and fear, we should stress that in "A Descent," Poe suggestively reveals the precarious, saving powers of reason and imagination as well as the destructive energies, impulses, and depths of the mind and universe, and our fascination with these inescapable depths and dangers.¹¹

Richard Wilbur has observed that Poe often models his stories on the descent into the dream state, and another basic model for his fiction emerges in "A Descent."¹² In this story, Poe apparently transformed and universalized his own experience of alcoholic fugue states—the dizziness, the roaring in the ears, the descent into unconsciousness, and the emergence, interestingly enough through the agency of a water-cask, so that Poe puts to the uses of suggestive inner exploration not only the public interest in voyages of discovery but also his own more private concerns.

"The Purloined Letter" and the other tales of ratiocination are the obverse of works like "MS Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom." As Richard Wilbur and Edward Davidson have shown, the poetic mind's unequivocal mastery over both ordinary and extraordinary men and circumstances—this dramatizing of the superiority of the poetic power of imagination gives the Dupin stories much of their urgency, distinguishes them from the ordinary detective story, and constitutes a large part of their appeal.¹³ Like the man in "A Descent," Dupin is a careful observer, so that he is not cut off from the outside world, but the important creative insights are achieved in the Gothically darkened chambers of his room and mind, "among recesses of thought altogether inaccessible to the ordinary understanding" ("The Murders in the Rue Morgue," IV, 148). Using Dupin's "truly imaginative" mind as his standard, Poe subjects to quiet ridicule those more routine mental habits the Inspector represents.

¹¹ *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago, 1953), p. 36.

¹² "Edgar Allan Poe," p. 378.

¹³ Wilbur, "Edgar Allan Poe," pp. 379-380 and Davidson, pp. 213-222.

As a law officer, the Inspector is an authority figure, an embodiment of some of the dominant values of his nineteenth-century American society. He is thorough, diligent, practical, and common-sensical; he works hard, methodically, and dully. His approach is inductive and Baconian, as Poe defines these terms in *Eureka*. Part of the mechanism of the tales of ratiocination is to show the superiority of the poet over the inspector, to put the authority figure in the power of the poet, to reverse the ordinary relations and, in a world that devalues poetic power, to affirm that power at the expense of practical men of affairs. Through his imaginative, intuitive ability to perceive analogies, to respond to oblique hints, to place himself in the mind of another, and to see things "as a whole" (IV, 166), as the esemplastic imagination should, the poet surrogate easily wins the gold at the expense of the respectable police official and the influential politician. In "The Purloined Letter" an inverted letter appropriately contributes to the success of this disguised man of letters. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in addition to the conflict with the Inspector, another main source of interest is the contest between the intuiting, reasoning mind and the brute horror of things, a contest the imaginative mind controls from start to finish.

To show the superiority of the poet and his imaginative powers, Poe also carries the attack into the citadel of science by arguing strongly against the supremacy of mathematics as a means of getting at "general truth" ("The Purloined Letter," VI, 44). Dupin, like Poe himself, has mathematical and analytical gifts, because on Poe's mature view of the mind "the *truly* imaginative are never otherwise than analytic" ("The Murders in the Rue Morgue," IV, 150), but the imaginative power is the comprehensive one.¹⁴ Because the Minister D is also a poet and mathematician, he is, as his initial suggest, a double of Dupin and is thus sympathetically treated until the surprising and unprepared for turn against him in the final paragraphs of "The Purloined Letter," a turn that cannot be fully explained by Poe's need to end the story in an interesting way. Is it that Poe, reacting against the prevailingly low estimates of the poet and against

¹⁴ A month before he published "The Purloined Letter" (Jan., 1845), Poe wrote in his *Marginalia* about "the silent analytical promptings of that poetic genius which, in its supreme development, embodies all orders of intellectual capacity" (Dec., 1844; XVI, 29).

criticisms of himself as a failure and “an unprincipled man of genius” (VI, 52), turns these charges against the Minister D in his role as successful man of affairs and, using the dreadful Thyestes myth, punishes the successful man as a failure? Or is it that Poe, who has elevated the imaginative powers through Dupin, also partly accepts the conventional negative judgment and expresses it through the final treatment of the double, the Minister D?

Whatever his reservations, however, at the center of the tales of ratiocination Poe dramatizes the triumph of the powers of imagination. More characteristic, and more characteristically “psychological,” are Poe’s stories about the destructive, not the creative, powers of the human mind, as in his studies of the cruel dynamics of obsession and self-punishment. The punitive animosities turned against others in “The Cask of Amontillado” and “Hop-Frog” also turn inward against the self in “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.” In “The Black Cat” even more powerfully than in “The Masque of the Red Death,” Poe also dramatizes his insights into the unconscious tendency of the mind to protect itself by rigidly suppressing threatening inner forces. Poe, moreover, knows that the mind can endow a neutral object like a cat with a charge of significance revealing the deepest strains in the character, and in “The Black Cat” he brilliantly suggests the inner dynamics, the underlying fear, hatred, and guilt that animate the narrator’s terrified obsession with a commonplace animal. The story suggests that these unacknowledged feelings are among the causes of the narrator’s alcoholism, a disease that finally intensifies and releases his mad, destructive tendencies, so that Poe’s view about himself—that the madness caused the drinking, and not the reverse—receives powerful imaginative confirmation.

The evil the narrator personifies in the black cat may be metaphysical and is certainly personal: by the end of the story, we are made to realize that, in cutting out the eye of the black demon, the narrator is also irrationally slashing and seeking to destroy his own demons, his own unacknowledged impulses and affinity with evil; he is expressing that mingled guilt and hatred of the unacknowledged dark powers in his own nature which he generalizes into the principle of perverseness, the “unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself*—to offer violence to its own

nature" (V, 146). In contrast to the author's imaginative understanding, the narrator consistently suppresses his awareness of the specific nature of this dark, threatening side of his personality, and in cutting out the eye of the black cat, perhaps he is also irrationally seeking to "root out" and deny his own unacceptable insights into his nature. To the even more basic extent that the cat as witch is also a surrogate for his wife—the climax of the story strongly suggests this unconscious connection—the narrator, in blinding the cat, is also expressing his hatred for his wife and his guilty sense that, unless he prevents it, she will see into him. The narrator never consciously admits this guilt and hatred, but his feelings emerge at first in his abusive language and at the end in murder.

The narrator has endowed the black cat with a complex significance he does not consciously recognize. No wonder, after he hangs the animal, he fears he has committed an ultimate sin, unforgivable even by the infinite mercy of God, surely an excessive reaction if the cat is simply a cat or even a mysterious embodiment of metaphysical evil but understandable if the narrator unconsciously feels he has acted out the murder of his wife from obscure, unmentionable motives.

Poe continues to demonstrate his imaginative grasp of these unconscious processes by suggesting that the destructive fire in the narrator's bedroom is either an act of unconscious self-punishment, an act of supernatural vengeance, or perhaps both, since the correlation between the irrational, dark tendencies of the mind and analogous forces in the universe is developed in "The Black Cat," as it is in different ways in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Descent into the Maelstrom." The narrator later encounters the double of his black cat—or is it the mysterious reincarnation?—or is the suggestion that he is pursued by the dark powers another indication of the narrator's sense of guilt and self-hatred? In any case, the narrator is again attracted to the cat, not surprisingly in view of the complex role the animal plays in his inner life.

As part of that role, the cat functions as a surrogate for the narrator's wife. Poe has a particularly sure understanding of the way we can displace onto a neutral object the feelings we are unable to admit we feel toward a human being. Through a series of humanized details that apply as much to a docile, affectionate

wife as to a cat—the cat covers him with “loathsome caresses,” is annoyingly underfoot, is fond of the narrator, to his disgust and annoyance—Poe suggests that the narrator is obscurely, powerfully disturbed by his wife’s sexual intimacies and by her interference with his freedom. The resulting murder is pervasively in the back of the narrator’s mind, since the gallows he immediately projects onto the cat’s white spot suggests his guilt feelings for the murder to come as well as for the earlier hanging. The “absolute dread” the cat inspired, moreover, although it may have supernatural implications, also has origins in the narrator’s unacknowledged hatred of his wife—Poe has indicated some of the sources—and in his unconscious recognition and fear of his own feelings and capacities for violence. The depth and complexity of the narrator’s emotions come to a focus in the image of the black cat, its “hot breath” and “vast weight” bearing down on him, the black cat “an incarnate Nightmare that I had no power to shake off” (V, 151) and a memorable instance of Poe’s ability to embody his psychological insights in a powerful symbol. Poe uses the image to suggest the intolerable burden of guilt, fear, hatred, and sexual threat which oppresses the narrator. In the narrator’s final attempt to rid himself of his burden by attacking the symbol of his distress, his wife interferes, his feelings of hatred and revulsion turn from the surrogate to their real object, and the narrator’s inner demons perform their fatal deed.

The feelings of guilt and self-hatred, evident throughout the narrative, become dominant after the murder, and in the final scene the narrator thus helps to bring about his own punishment and destruction. In having the narrator accidentally wall up the black cat, Poe continues until the end to develop the story’s suggestive ambiguity. The “accidental” oversight is another example of unconscious suppression and hatred—a cat would be obvious in such confined quarters—but the “accident” may also be the result of the dark powers without reinforcing the dark powers within. Or is Poe again engaging with the troubled borderline between religion and psychology by having his narrator suggest quasi-religious and metaphysical explanations as a mask for personal disorder? In any case, the concluding image of the decayed, gore-clotted corpse and the “seducing” beast, “with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire” (V, 155) brings to a suggestive

focus Poe's insights into the disturbing power of blocked sexuality, guilt, and demonic hatred. In view of Poe's achievement in "The Black Cat," it would be unwise for criticism to concentrate on the "unfathomable" metaphysical faculty of perverseness and to overlook or minimize Poe's unusually specific and profound understanding of the processes of obsession, displacement, hatred, and self-hatred.¹⁵

In a closely related story, "The Tell-Tale Heart," in having the narrator focus on another apparently trivial detail, the old man's eye, Poe shows both his ability to vary one of his major symbols and, even more important, his advanced understanding of irrational motivation, of the charge of unrecognized significance and underlying anxiety, dread, and terror that animate such apparently meaningless obsessions.

Without being at all mechanical, Poe establishes that the old man's eye is repulsively ugly. But traditionally the eye is the source of insight and particularly of insight into the ideal and the beautiful, those two categories stressed in Poe's aesthetics and connected with the eyes and vision in stories like "Ligeia." The narrator reacts as powerfully as he does because the old man's eye, filmed over as it is, suggests that these important regions are inaccessible, or at least that the old man is shut off from them. The film over the old man's eye also suggests the infirmity and disease of old age and impending death. In getting rid of the eye, the narrator is irrationally trying to do away with ugliness, his anxiety about mortality, and the metaphysical as well as the psychological dread that existence is meaningless, on the

¹⁵ For a related view of perverseness stressing Poe's moral concerns, see James W. Gargano, "'The Black Cat': Perverseness Reconsidered," *TSSL*, 2 (1960), 172-179.

In his review of Fouqué's *Undine*, which he overvalued as one of the world's greatest books, Poe responded enthusiastically to what he saw as an allegory on Fouqué's marital relations and troubles (*Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, Sept., 1839; X, 30-39, and the *Marginalia* for Dec., 1844; XVI, 48-51). See also the favorable remarks in the review of *Twice-Told Tales* ([Nov., 1847], XIII, 149). "The Black Cat" probably has a biographical basis, too, and the discrepancy between the mild, delicate romance Poe praises in his criticism and the more profound and disturbing work he created in his fiction reminds us again that Poe's criticism is an imperfect guide to his creative work. The "purity" and "ideality" he commends in his review of *Undine* and in his poetics are not the dominant qualities of "The Black Cat" (or of "The Fall of the House of Usher," published in the same issue of *Burton's* as the *Undine* review). On the evidence of "The Black Cat," it is also questionable if the imp of the perverse is really a "saving" force in Poe's eschatology and psychology (Moldenhauer, p. 295).

grounds that the ideal and the beautiful make for meaning, as they do in Poe's outlook. If the figure of John Allan lurks in the distant background, we can understand some of the personal sources of this detail, since Allan must certainly have called into question the meaning of Poe's life and central commitments. Blind as the eye is, it still keeps watch, and to destroy it is to destroy all it represents.

Poe also knows about the hate that is inseparable from love, since the narrator "loved the old man" (V, 88) in a singularly destructive way. As in "The Cask of Amontillado," the narrator controls and tortures his elderly antagonist, at the same time that he himself is dominated by his own irrational terror and hatred. The story is compelling partly because the narrator's lucidity and control, mirrored in his prose style, are combined with his profound irrationality and a progressive revelation of basic anxiety, terror, and dread. In powerful episodes Poe keeps attention focused on the eye and its double, the eye of the lantern, so as to develop the depth of the narrator's madness, to unify the story, and to intensify the sense of terror and mystery as well as suggest the strange connection between the old man and the narrator.¹⁶

Killing the old man, destroying the "pale blue eye," does not remove the sources of the narrator's underlying dread. The punitive hatred and fear directed against the old man are intensified by the guilt of murder and turn inward against the narrator himself. "When people hate with all that energy," an Evelyn Waugh character says, "it is something in themselves they are hating." To the extent that the eye embodies the narrator's own fears and tendencies, to the extent that he has irrationally identified himself with his victim, to the extent that the relation has powerful Oedipal reverberations, to that extent the narrator has already destroyed part of himself. At the end, the narrator is responsive enough to the claims of the heart, to the claims of affection, life, and benevolence, so that he punishes himself, but these positive qualities are not integrated into his being and in this seriously split self the claims of affection take the form of punitive guilt feelings—their complex sources have been suggested—and they express themselves in an act of final self-destruction.

¹⁶ For analysis of the psychological identification of the narrator and his victim, see E. Arthur Robinson, "Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" *NCF*, 19 (1965), 369-378.

In "The Tell-Tale Heart" and in most of Poe's best fiction, the sense of general relevance we ask for in major art comes from this imaginative understanding and probing of significant human tendencies, powers, and disturbances ordinarily suppressed and obscured. These stories can, of course, become metaphors for the realities and horrors of social, political, religious, and epistemological situations, so that their human relevance is first but not exclusively psychological.

Poe, for example, provides an anatomy of psychological paralysis, of the consciousness claustrophobically trapped in its own irrational depths and struggling vainly to free itself from unnamed, threatening forces, as in "The Pit and the Pendulum" or the scenes in the hold of the ship in *Pym*. Elsewhere, hostility flares out and a Fortunato or a group of natives are killed. Sometimes reason and the creative imagination are in control, as in "The Purloined Letter," but more often the inner and outer forces of chaos threaten and dominate, annihilation in the abyss is close, the walls move in and we seem powerless to stop them, and the inner world Poe characterized so precisely begins to seem a paradigm of the public world we read about in our daily newspapers. He was "Our Cousin, Mr. Poe," for Allen Tate, and on both public and psychological grounds perhaps after all he is our cousin, too.

In establishing bonds of kinship, we may, however, seize too eagerly on those elements in *Eureka* and in Poe's aesthetics which emphasize the positive religious and aesthetic values of union with Divine Beauty and Unity and we may imply that in Poe's imagined world these positive elements balance or overbalance the exploration of internal terror, destruction and self-destruction, cruelty, obsession, chaos, and dread. As a recent critic has put it, "life is, in Poe's vision, the thing to be defeated, to be transcended, or to be evaded in acts of an aesthetic character. These acts are simultaneously the destruction of the self and the creation of the perfect poem."¹⁷ I would urge, however, that, except for the Dupin stories, some of the comic tales, and possibly "A Descent into the Maelstrom," the emphasis on destruction and terror overwhelmingly predominates in Poe's best work and that, moreover, we should not confine our reading of Poe's fiction to the religious and aesthetic terminology of *Eureka*

¹⁷ Moldenhauer, p. 297.

and the critical essays—to a vocabulary of Beauty, Divinity, and aesthetic perfection painfully achieved through personal or universal annihilation, disintegration, and catastrophe. To limit ourselves or to give our main emphasis to Poe's explicit vocabulary and concepts will prevent us from responding to the full range of Poe's precise, profound, and disturbing revelations of our shared mental powers. Because of our present understanding of Poe's theory, we are in a position to begin reading again for their telling psychological insights a body of fiction we had assumed to be badly overinterpreted and hence closed to a psychological approach. Since Poe is primarily successful as the cosmographer of the troubled, destroying, and creating self, our critical approach might well keep actively in touch with these dimensions of Poe's success.

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