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Tales of Mystery and Imagination

EDGAR ALLAN POE

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TALES OF MYSTERY AND IMAGINATION

Edgar Allan Poe

Introduction and Notes by

JOHN S. WHITLEY
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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

It has never been easy to give details of Poe's life because he frequently fantasised (lied) about dates and places and he suffered from possibly the worst literary executor in history, Rufus Griswold, who sought every opportunity to blacken Poe's name. Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston in 1809 to actor parents who very soon died, whereupon the infant was taken in by John Allan, a merchant in Richmond, Virginia. He lived with the Allans, including a lengthy spell in England, until he was seventeen, thus acquiring a lifelong conception of himself as a Southern gentleman. A brief period as a student at the University of Virginia was followed by the publication, in 1827, of *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, a two-year spell in the army and the publication of *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems* in 1829. After less than a year at West Point (1830–1) he was expelled. A third volume of *Poems* appeared in 1831. The years in Baltimore, 1831–5, were characterised

by poverty, marriage to his thirteen-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm, the friendship of the writer John Pendleton Kennedy and the commencement, with 'Metzengerstein' in the Philadelphia *Saturday Courier*, in 1832, of the publication of his tales. In 1833 he won fifty dollars from the *Baltimore Saturday Visitor* for 'MS. Found in a Bottle'.

He worked as an assistant editor on the *Southern Literary Messenger* in Richmond from 1835–7, and published *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* in 1838, though, because he pretended only to be its editor, a typical Gothic trick, he earned no money from it. This was hard, for he and his family were extremely poor by this time. In 1839 he found a job as co-editor of *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in Philadelphia, where he continued his reputation as a brilliant but acerbic reviewer and literary theorist, and published *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, which was not a success. Fired from *Burton's* because he would not stop drinking, he became a co-editor of *Graham's Magazine* and his powers as a writer were at their height. During the next few years he published work steadily, including a collection of a dozen of his stories and *The Raven and Other Poems*, all in 1845. He also became sole owner of the *Broadway Journal*, a move which, like so many in his benighted life, turned out to be a failure. His drinking and ill-health increased in 1847, following the death of his wife, who had been a semi-invalid for a number of years. He managed to publish 'Ulalume' in 1847 and his remarkable work *Eureka* the following year. Amid a number of entanglements with women and following a brief adherence to the Temperance Movement, he died in mysterious circumstances in Baltimore on 7 October 1849.

It should be said at this point that despite Poe's ultimately considerable literary reputation, something he always felt he should have, he was a racist (witness *Arthur Gordon Pym*), a supporter of slavery, a snob (his detestation of mobs seems at times to edge over into a dislike of people), a user of drugs, an alcoholic, a paranoiac (while some of his feuds had substance, others did not) and a hysteric. None of this alters his literary stature one jot, but it does give strength to D. H. Lawrence's dictum: 'An artist is usually a damned liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day.'[1]

Poe's major claim to fame is as the father of the short story. In November 1838 he published, in the *American Museum*, a piece entitled 'The Psyche Zenobia', which was later changed to 'How to Write a *Blackwood* Article'. This is a slight, rather wearying satire on the

1 D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Garden City, New York 1951, p. 12

contemporary taste for 'sensation' stories, wherein the central character is found in a terrible predicament involving incarceration, torture or the threat of an awful death, his or her sensations as they happen being minutely described. The article shows that Poe had read much in British and American magazine fiction[2] because he uses the actual titles of fictions published in such magazines as *Blackwood's*, *Fraser's* and *The London Magazine*. He also satirises his own practices-to-be, for 'The Tell-Tale Heart', 'The Premature Burial' and 'The Pit and the Pendulum' are classic examples of the 'sensation tale'. In America, Washington Irving had gained great prominence with the publication of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* in 1819–20, which seemed to indicate differences between a 'sketch' (brief, lacking in plot, the product of a sauntering observer, a forerunner of a story) and longer pieces, such as 'Rip Van Winkle' and 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow', where Irving becomes more interested in a historical approach, character delineation, mythic and cultural reference and a catching of some aspects of the national spirit. Irving begins 'Rip Van Winkle' by alluding to 'the following tale' and this is the most often used term for short fiction in the nineteenth century. Apart from the volume to which this is an introduction, Irving also published *Tales of a Traveller* (1824), Hawthorne, who was also very fond of the 'sketch', enjoyed considerable fame with his *Twice-Told Tales* (1837, enlarged in 1842) and Melville achieved some of his finest writing in *The Piazza Tales* (1856). Into the twentieth century Henry James, whose short fictions were often surprisingly long, and Sherwood Anderson continued to use the term, but from the middle of the nineteenth century the use of 'story' was gathering force, as in Thomas Bailey Aldrich's *Marjorie Daw and Other Stories* (1873) and Fitz James O'Brien's *The Diamond Lens with Other Stories* (1885).

In 1884, Brander Matthews, a critic and story-writer, coined the term, 'short-story'[3] and Bret Harte, writing in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1899, pointed out that the rise of the 'new' form had much to do with the development of American humorous 'tall tales' and the demand for 'local colour' stories, especially after the Civil War; stories that described the customs and speech of one part of the United States to the other parts, especially readers on the Eastern seaboard. Harte also remarks that the popularity of short fiction in the United States might lie in the limited amount of time available for perusing fiction among busy American readers: 'perhaps the proverbial haste of American life

2 See Michael Allen, *Poe and the British Magazine Tradition*, New York 1969.

3 Brander Matthews, 'The Philosophy of the Short-story' reprinted in Hollis Summers (ed.), *Discussions of the Short Story*, Boston 1963, pp. 10–14

was some inducement to its brevity'.[4] In 1930, John Cournos repeated this point: 'the American temperament, evolved out of a preoccupation with concrete, practical matters, and a tendency to rush and hurry, demands its literature terse and to the point';[5] and, much more recently, an American scholar has echoed this sentiment more colloquially: 'The short story is better suited to our habits. Like the hamburger, it satisfies the appetites of those who eat and read on the run.'[6]

The tale/short story can, indeed, be considered an almost indigenous American literary form. Consider how much the long fiction of Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, James, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner owes to their short fiction, sometimes rearranged for inclusion in their novels, and compare the respective outputs of comparable European prose fiction writers. In the nineteenth century, especially, major novelists such as Dickens, George Eliot, the Brontës, Trollope and Thackeray show little accomplishment in short fiction. Hardy shows some, but one has to wait for Joseph Conrad before a major novelist is also a major writer of tales. The reasons for this state of affairs are rather more complicated than Harte and Cournos suggest. Short fiction flourished in the United States from an early point in the nineteenth century because that country had far more outlets for short fiction – in terms of magazines, journals, gift annuals, etc. – than existed in European countries, a situation which is still true to the present day. A look at the original publication details of Poe's tales will help to illustrate this. He published stories and sketches in approximately thirty different outlets, including such stalwarts as *Godey's Lady's Book*, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, *Graham's Magazine*, the *Democratic Review* and the *Broadway Journal*.

The American novel was slow to develop in the first half of the nineteenth century because of the lack of an international copyright agreement (something not achieved until the 1890s) which meant that European novels could be swiftly reproduced without paying the authors any royalties. Scott was probably the worst sufferer and Dickens spoke publicly about this inequity during his 1842 visit to the United States. American novelists did have a national copyright agreement and so were much more expensive to publish, therefore it was somewhat harder for them to acquire a foothold. To be sure,

4 Bret Harte, 'The Rise of the "Short Story" ', reprinted in Summers, pp. 5–9

5 John Cournos (ed.), *American Short Stories of the Nineteenth Century*, London 1930, p. v

6 Max Putzel, *Genius of Place: William Faulkner's Triumphant Beginnings*, Baton Rouge 1985, p. xiii

American magazines clamoured for the creation of a truly national literature which would free American writers from the artistic shackles of the Old World. Since it was so difficult for this national voice to be transmitted through novels, the tale developed rapidly because American writers had few models to imitate and so were almost forced to experiment with shorter forms.

Since the Old World and its authority was firmly linked with the past, it is perhaps not surprising that the short story tends often to discard historical preambles, character background and social context. Brander Matthews suggests that the short story owes much to the notion of the three unities in drama: those of time, space and action. A play adhering to these unities would occupy approximately the same dramatic time as the real time of the audience, or, at least, no more than one day. The same set would be used throughout and there would be no sub-plots or deviations from the main narrative thrust. A good recent example would be Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* (1983). Matthews insists that the short story must have a 'unity of impression', obtained through 'ingenuity, originality, and compression'. He asserts that the form must have a 'subject', a story to tell, a 'plan' if not a 'plot'; because, while a sketch may be 'still-life,' in a short story 'something always happens'. The short story, he says, 'is one of the few sharply defined forms', whereas the novel is often a 'hybrid'.[7] These are all excellent points, but it has to be said that they were not, when Matthews made them, original points, for Poe had insisted on them forty years earlier.

Poe's claim to be the father of the short story, especially in America, rests partly on the fact that he was its first theorist. Thus, at the same time as he was developing his artistry in short fiction and paving the way for others to follow, he was also mapping out the territory, fixing boundaries, naming routes, setting up a terminology for the exploration of short fiction. In a review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, first published in *Graham's Magazine* in May 1842,[8] Poe praised Hawthorne's originality, scorned contemporary critics for failing to evaluate his contribution to the bougeoning greatness of American literature, and analysed his success as a writer. Hawthorne's greatest weakness, for Poe as for Henry James, was his strong penchant for allegory. Poe's view is that allegory can only work at all if it constitutes a 'very

7 Summers, pp. 10–14

8 Poe's comments on Hawthorne, from which these points are taken, can be found, for convenience, in *Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Poems and Selected Essays* (ed. Richard Gray), Everyman, London 1993 pp. 240–52.

profound undercurrent' which never distorts the surface of the narrative, never seeks to divert from or confuse the 'unity of effect' so essential to short fiction. In order to achieve this, the tale must be such as can be read in one sitting. Worldly interests intervene while a novel is being read, its rhythm is often dictated by the fact that it was originally published serially, in weekly or even monthly parts. It is too easy for the author to wander into sub-plots and digressions, as Sterne saw only too well. In reviewing Bulwer Lytton's novel *Night and Morning* (1841), Poe expressed dismay at its 'continual and vexatious shifting of scene'.[9]

Poe feels that during the perusal of a piece of short fiction, which he estimates at about an hour, the soul of the reader is in the writer's control: nothing intervenes or distracts. Events and incidents move towards the 'preconceived effect' and every word written must work towards one conclusion. As he says of Hawthorne's 'The Hollow of the Three Hills': 'Every word *tells*, and there is not a word which does *not* tell.'

While the highest idea of a poem is the idea of the Beautiful, Poe argues that the aim of the tale is Truth, and he points out that some of the finest tales are tales of ratiocination, of formal reasoning power. Of course, he wrote several of these himself, but perhaps by 'Truth' he really meant the working of every part of the story – rhythm, plot, character, language, references – towards a denouement which ends the story logically, consistently and satisfactorily. Certainly, this definition cannot apply to his long story *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, but, in general, his best stories serve his precepts with wonderful fidelity.

An admirable example of Poe practising what he preaches can be seen in 'The Cask of Amontillado', first published in *Godey's* in November 1846. It comes, therefore, at a point late in Poe's career and so can draw strength from aspects of intertextuality. As in several of his other stories, such as 'The Tell-Tale Heart' and 'The Black Cat', the opening seems to take us into a conversation between the narrator and someone whom he addresses as 'you' (p. 202). The narrator is unburdening himself. The listener who knows so well the narrator's soul may be a priest or a doctor or a friend, but, principally, s/he is the reader, who is made privy to the protagonist's innermost fears and desires, as in sensation tales. Poe, however, goes beyond the lurid details of these hack stories to carefully stated suggestions of abnormal psychology. The description of the proper requirements for revenge in

9 in *Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. 10 (ed. James A. Harrison), New York 1965 (originally published in 1902), p. 123

the opening paragraph intimate a psychopathology as intense as the obsession in 'The Tell-Tale Heart' or the hallucinatory experience in 'Ligeia'. Indeed, it could be argued that the figure represented by 'you' is being invited to watch a performance, to collaborate with the central protagonist in the extended 'joke' being played on Fortunato. The second paragraph of 'The Cask of Amontillado' creates a link between the narrator and Fortunato – their connoisseurship in wine. Our finding out, a page or so later, that they have similar names, Fortunato and Montresor, reminds the reader of Poe's use of doubles in 'William Wilson', 'The Fall of the House of Usher', 'The Purloined Letter' and 'Ligeia'. Fortunato seems to have a higher social status which Montresor might have had, or used to have ('you are happy, as once I was' [p. 204]) and Fortunato is walled up in the deepest, darkest and smallest part of the Montresor vaults. As in the Gothic imagination, Poe's vaults are images of the subconscious/unconscious where aspects of the protagonist's life lie, or refuse to lie, buried: thus Madeline in the Usher vault, the old man beneath the floorboards, the murdered wife in the cellar, the inhabitant of the oblong box. In reality, or in conscience, or in memory, the dead will not lie still. Fortunato is a drunk and the story has a good deal of reference to alcohol and its muddling of the wits. Is Montresor the cold, rational part expelling that which causes chaos in his brain? To the end, the two protagonists are inextricably linked:

> A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. For a brief moment I hesitated – I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier, I began to grope with it about the recess; but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall. I replied to the yells of him who clamoured. I re-echoed – I aided – I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamourer grew still. (p. 206)

Once again, Poe has narrowed the action, physically and mentally, to the smallest compass. Montresor has difficulty ridding himself of the hated 'other' and even for a moment believes that, somehow, that other self has managed to evade destruction. He shouts it down desperately, just as the narrator of 'The Tell-Tale Heart' finally leaps on his victim 'With a loud yell' (p. 223). The final, terrible joke, 'Let us be gone' (p. 207) thus has considerable reverberation at the end of the story. Since it seems that Montresor has been haunted by his crime for fifty years, neither can be said to have rested in peace.

It is carnival season, when Misrule rules and mirth and conviviality

are triumphant on the surface. The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, discussing the emergence of the dialogic novel, in which various points of view are presented without any unificatory strategies, uses the term 'carnival' to posit a literary world in which authoritarian structures which presuppose the existence of hierarchy and unity are thoroughly subverted.[10] Carnival here could be said to mean just the opposite. Here drink creates a fool and the only mirth is 'a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head' (p. 207). Alcohol causes misrule, that is a failure to rule oneself, and hence has to be shut up forever. Just as the two central characters move remorselessly towards the point of doom, so laughter becomes increasingly hollow, attenuated, deranged, until it tails off to nothing. Montresor is in complete control and so there is no subversion of authority, only its enhancement. Poe was always concerned with the acquiring of unity, however painfully, and here all features point the same way. The puns are way stations: 'Medoc', 'De Grave', 'mason'; irony piles on irony: the vaults are encrusted with nitre which might, under different circumstances, be made to have a medicinal effect; *nemo me impune lacessit*[11] is, most emphatically, not a motto anyone should forget, and it is Montresor whose heart grows sick, though it is Fortunato who coughs. In the space of five and a half pages, Poe succeeds both in anticipating the modern views of the fragmentation of personality and demonstrating the value of his own views of fiction. The reader may also, through perusal of this kind of story, see the great value of sensational fiction to writers who were, as yet, bereft of models for dealing with social fiction at a time when America lacked a society of sufficient density to make such writing more than barely feasible.

Since the 1950s, Edgar Allan Poe has, like so many classic American writers, become an academic industry. A visit to a university library will reveal volumes examining French criticism of Poe; Poe in Russia; the image of Poe in American poetry; Poe and the British magazine tradition; the Scandinavian response to Poe; Poe, Lacan and Derrida; and one 'simply' called *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (presumably because the author, like his subject, believed in the powers of incantation). Yet for most people it surely remains the case that Poe has two great claims to fame. The first is that, in his three Dupin stories, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'; 'The Mystery of Marie Roget'; and 'The Purloined Letter', as well as the cipher tale, 'The Gold Bug', and the least-likely-

10 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (trans. R.W Rotsel), Ann Arbor, Michigan 1973.

11 'no one injures me with impunity'

suspect story, 'Thou Art The Man', he laid the foundations for the subsequent development of the detective story. Poe can be credited with the creation or very early refinements of the locked-room convention; the Olympian detective; the less-than-brilliant associate and chronicler; the linguistic and visual puzzle; the easily dismissed police force; the murder as disruption of a small town; and the solving of crime as an intellectual exercise.

The second claim to fame is that he is one of the greatest of all writers of horror stories; not merely because he made more sophisticated the elements he took from the European Gothic tradition, such as subterranean dangers, the 'femme fatale' (literally so in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'), burial alive, ghosts, excessive curiosity, the curse from the past and exotic locales; but because he fashioned those elements into a remarkable investigation of abnormal psychological states and obsessional behaviour (what he chose to call 'the imp of the perverse'). In his Preface to the original edition of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) he asserted that 'terror is not of Germany, but of the soul', thus immediately distancing himself from what he saw as outdated Gothic paraphernalia. The Gothic novel served as a major model for the early development of fiction in America. In Cournos's interesting 1930 collection,[12] I find that the first two stories, 'Peter Rugg, The Missing Man' by William Austin (1824) and 'Rip Van Winkle' by Washington Irving (1819), both use the old Gothic notion of the man who defies a higher power and loses his place in the normal flow of time and in each case misses the change from colony to new nation; an excellent example of the way in which a popular literary formula was used to air the stresses and nostalgias of contemporary life. One of the earliest published American novelists, Charles Brockden Brown, was a fully-fledged Gothic novelist, whose works substituted Indians for the demons of European Gothic; where humble two-storey wooden edifices, far from crumbling ruins, still hold terrors from the European past, and where the chaos of the plot mirrors the chaos of the first decades after the War of Revolution, when there seemed to be little tradition and few recognised moral and political codes to work with. Similarly, one does not have to read far into the tales and novels of a much greater American nineteenth-century writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, to see how heavy was the influence of the European

12 This volume includes some now little-known American short-story writers, such as Frank R. Stockton, Madelene Yale Wynne and Richard Harding Davis.

Gothic on his writing.[13] The curse from the past, a staple of Gothic fiction, is underlined relentlessly by the predicaments of Poe's protagonists. So many of them are haunted and destroyed by spectres from their past lives and one can see here how the early American writers' reliance on Gothic models underlined both the thinness of their contemporary culture and their fears that the war of revolution had not eradicated old evils, but only found ways of domesticating them.

'The Tell-Tale Heart' is an excellent example of Gothic elements narrowed down to the smallest possible compass in order to emphasise the narrator's horrifying descent into madness. The castle becomes two small rooms, the subterranean caverns become the small space under a few floorboards, the cast of characters is limited to two (of whom one could, just possibly, be a figment of the other's imagination) and the past is discounted as any explanation of the narrator's obsession: 'It is impossible to say how the idea entered my brain, but once conceived, it haunted me day and night.' Even when he seems to be more obviously indebted to European models, as in 'The Fall of the House of Usher', the Gothic drama is soon internalised, since the allegorical links between Gothic architecture and the structure of the human consciousness, always lurking less or more plainly in earlier narratives, are here made manifest, both by the description of the house itself and the rather intrusive poem 'The Haunted Palace', as well as the small cast of three; allowing for a reading which sees Roderick as the human intellect torn between rationality (the narrator) and ideality (Madeline)[14] – a struggle which is far from equal. Poe can also leave the reader poised between psychological and 'Gothic' readings, as in 'Ligeia', where it is likely that the narrator has created a milieu where it is possible for him to hallucinate the presence of his first wife, even by killing his second, but where it is equally possible that Ligeia, through the sheer force of her will, returns from the dead to take over Rowena's body. It is the 'Gothic' readings, of course, which so appealed to the American film director, Roger Corman, in a series of movies based on Poe's stories which were released between 1960 and 1965.

It has often been asserted that there are, therefore, two Poes; the writer of tales of imagination, where the irrational reigns supreme, and the writer of mystery tales whose cardinal emphasis is on the operation of the reasoning faculties. This seems to me to be the same kind of

13 See Jane Lundblad, *Nathaniel Hawthorne and European Literary Tradition*, New York 1947.

14 See D. Ketterer, *The Rationale of Deception in Poe*, Baton Rouge 1979, pp. 192–8.

simplification as saying that there are two John Donnes, the writer of love poems and the composer of religious poetry. Just as Donne takes an attitude of jokey adoration toward his beloved(s), so his devotion to God is frequently couched in the passion, wit and startling wordplay of his more material relationships. There is only one John Donne and all his work shares in his struggles towards what he conceives as an ideal state; so it is with the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Perhaps the best way to understand this is to start with Poe's least accessible work, *Eureka*, a Romantic prose-poem-cum-philosophical-and-mathematical treatise on the nature of the universe, first published in 1848. This long work is impossible to summarise in the brief space of this introduction: suffice it to say that Poe's view of the universe is at once highly sophisticated and profoundly simple. The reason for this is that Poe is dissatisfied with recent theories of cosmogony, including the basic regularity of the Newtonian universe, and, therefore, he anticipates Einstein in discussing the finiteness of space and time. But his insistence on the original *unity* of the universe is really the final gesture of the Romantic imagination. Just as Wordsworth could talk about that which we half-perceive and half-create and Coleridge could argue that the outside world only becomes alive through the shaping spirit of the poet's imagination, so Poe felt that the prime impulse of the artist must be towards restoring an original unity to the chaos which seems to surround the poetic spirit. Thus, at the very beginning of *Eureka*, he likens the artistic impulse to a person spinning round on his heel at the top of Mount Etna so as to obtain a dizzy blending of the formally disparate elements of the scene into a vertiginous whole. He repeatedly insists on the need for a leap of imagination or 'faith' to understand the operations of the universe and this is demonstrated in the texture of his prose:

> Does not so evident a brotherhood among the atoms point to a common parentage? Does not a sympathy so omniprevalent, so ineradicable, and so thoroughly irrespective, suggest a common paternity as its source? Does not one extreme impel the reason to the other? Does not the infinitude of division refer to the utterness of individuality? Does not the entireness of the complex hint at the perfection of the simple? It is *not* that the atoms, as we see them, are divided or that they are complex in their relations – but that they are inconceivably divided and unutterably complex: it is the extremeness of the conditions to which I now allude, rather than to the conditions themselves. In a word, not because the atoms were, at some remote epoch of time even *more than together* – is it not

> because originally, and therefore normally, they were *One* – that now, in all circumstances – at all points – in all directions – by all modes of approach – in all relations and through all conditions – they struggle *back* to this absolutely, this irrelatively, this unconditionally *One*?[15]

Note how the reader is lulled here by the familial references, by the balance of words, 'entireness. . . . perfection', but, most of all, by the insistence, in both the thought and language of this passage, of the *extremeness* of Poe's imaginative creations (an orang-utan; whirlpools; plagues; wind machines which make the curtains move; journeys into strange and irregular lands; premature burials). There is, then, an extreme *oneness* involved in the stories: the vampiric-seeming Madeline Usher literally falls on top of her brother Roderick, and they both expire at the same moment (followed immediately by the house crumbling into its inverted image in the tarn); the magical conditions of a pentagonal chamber create a situation where the 'hyacinthine'-haired Ligeia merges with the fair-haired Lady Rowena; the coat of arms of the Montresors – 'a huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel' – supports enticingly the idea of the double that I have already outlined as crucial to an understanding of that story.[16] And, finally, premature burial approaches as close to a oneness with death as is humanly possible (without dying). Thus Poe, like Shelley, recorded the 'desire of the moth for a star', the effort of the Romantic artist to create the journey towards, and sometimes the arrival at, a supernal realm of the imagination; but, for Poe, the search is very dangerous and the result might well be horrific. Keats longed for death, but Poe was less sure. The end of the search might be the Domain of Arnheim:

> There is a gush of entrancing melody; . . . there is a dreamlike intermingling to the eye of tall slender Eastern trees, bosky shrubberies, flocks of golden and crimson birds, lily-fringed lakes, meadows of violets, tulips, poppies . . .[17]

15 H. Beaver (ed.), *The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, Harmondsworth 1976, p. 237

16 Herman Melville seems to have had a similar notion in 'Benito Cereno' in describing the stern-piece of the slave-ship: 'uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked.' See H. Beaver (ed.), *Billy Budd, Sailor & Other Stories*, Harmondsworth 1967, p. 220.

17 See *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. 3 (ed. T. O. Mabbott), Cambridge, Mass. 1978, p. 1283.

but is more likely to be a plunge into an abyss; a drop into a pit containing who knows what horrors; incarceration in some dreadful darkness; or even, in 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', merely 'detestable putrescence' (p. 38).

The oneness is as applicable to the detective stories as to the horror tales. In *Eureka*, Poe, despite a good deal of scorn aimed at the philosophers who deal only in *facts* ('a more intolerable set of bigots and tyrants never existed on the face of the earth'),[18] seeks to combine scientific observation with poetic leaps of the imagination. Similarly, Dupin, Poe's great detective, makes such a leap with no difficulty. In 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' he remembers the great French thief-taker/detective, Vidocq, and his limitations:

> 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. (p. 74)

This could also be said of the French police in 'The Purloined Letter', who search the apartment with absolute thoroughness but fail to see the letter in the letter-rack because they have not obtained any conception of the *room*. They are easily outdone by Dupin, who finds the letter because he has a notion of the room as a whole, he sees the *oneness* of the room. One is reminded here of Mark Twain's view of Sherlock Holmes's success rate:

> Anybody that knows him the way I do knows he can't detect a crime except where he plans it all out beforehand and arranges the clues and hires some fellow to commit it according to instructions. [19]

There is a real sense, then, in these stories that the world goes according to Dupin's view of how it should go.

Oneness, in Poe's stories, comes often from a rapacious curiosity. In this, Poe adapted a borrowing from the European Gothic tradition, wherein curiosity is both the motor force of the plot and the Achilles' heel of the central protagonist. In *The Monk* (1796), such a desire to know hands the hero into the clutches of the Devil and a grisly end; in *Caleb Williams* (1794), the hero's quest for the truth about his employer, Falkland, is compared to Pandora's opening of the dreaded box; and Vathek's quest for knowledge, in William Beckford's novella of that name (1786), leads to damnation because

18 *The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, op. cit., p. 215

19 C. Neider (ed.), *The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain*, New York 1958, p. 451

> Such shall be the chastisement of that blind curiosity, which would transgress those bounds the wisdom of the Creator has prescribed to human knowledge . . . [20]

For Poe, curiosity fits much less easily into any pattern of transgression and punishment. No condemnation of the narrator of 'Ligeia' occurs, despite the possibility that he has murdered his wife; the narrator of 'The Pit and the Pendulum', despite his semi-conscious desire to merge with whatever horrors exist at the bottom of the pit, is given a last-minute, tongue-in-cheek rescue by *deus ex machina*; the narrator of most of 'A Descent into the Maelstrom' emerges from the abyss with his hair changed from 'raven-black' to 'white' but with a strong ability to tell his tale. To *know* can lead to horror, just like the desire for oneness (at its limit, this merging can only come through death), but it can also lead to an escape from this humdrum world of *facts*.

I have already mentioned that Poe is revered as a great *American* writer, but that estimate raises obvious problems, for how far can Poe be seen as American? His stories are usually set in some imaginary or at least unnamed land. Where is the House of Usher? Perhaps it is best to say that most of his tales and poems occur in a place he locates, in 'Dream-land', 'Out of SPACE – out of TIME'. When he wishes to use an actual place for the location of memory, he uses the 'Old World' of England ('William Wilson'); when he wants to create a city detective he invents a Frenchman and places him in Paris, even making mistakes when he transposes the events of a real American murder case to France in 'The Mystery of Marie Roget'; and on the rare occasion when he wants to use a story to illuminate a growing problem of anomie and identity in the growing cityscape, he chooses London ('The Man of the Crowd'). In the present volume, the only stories which set foot in the United States are 'The Gold Bug', which almost immediately leaves Charleston for an island off the coast of South Carolina, and 'The Oblong Box', which very soon sets sail for the open sea. Mention might be made, however, of the last tale in this volume, 'Some Words with a Mummy', which turns out to be an arch and half-hearted satiric allegory of Poe's view of American politics. The subject-matter of the last-named tale thus makes it very unusual among Poe's works; for the reader scans his writings almost in vain for references to American history or biography or politics or, indeed, American literature. We are reminded of Poe's wranglings with the East Coast

20 P. Fairclough (ed.), *Three Gothic Novels*, Harmondsworth 1968, p. 254