EDGAR ALLAN POE'S VISION

Lisa Borenstein

EDGAR ALLAN POE'S VISION

by

Lise Borenstein

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

English Department,
McGill University,
Montreal.

August, 1967

EDGAR ALLAN POE'S VISION

CONTENTS

EDGAR ALLAN POE'S VISION

The study seeks to place Poe beyond the partisan views of his French and American critics by showing him to be a transitional figure, the first self-critical craftsman of the post-Romantic period to make conscious use of the symbolic, irrational infrastructure of public symbolism. Poe's value is seen to lie in his attempt to find viable poetic symbols for hitherto unexplored areas of experience. A selective survey of Poe's tales and poems reveals him as the first poet to give expression to the Unconscious. The "voyage," as exemplified in The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, is analyzed as one of the central motifs of Poe's cohesive vision. Finally, Poe's "horror tale" is shown to be an early exercise of the Psychology of Fear, as it was eventually fully exploited by Dostoievski, Kafka, and others.

Lisa Borenstein
Master of Arts
English Department

L'ENFANT TERRIBLE OF AMERICAN LETTERS

In his conclusion to an article entitled "Our Cousin, Mr. Poe," Allen Tate indicates the nuances behind the American critical attitude toward Edgar Allan Poe. Concerning Poe's reception by the American public, he says:

> Nobody then--my great-grandfather, my mother, three generations--believed him. It is time we did. I confess that his voice is so near that I recoil a little, lest he, Montresor, lead me into the cellar, address me as Fortunato, and wall me up alive. I should join his melancholy troupe of the undead, whose voices are surely as low and harsh as the grating teeth of storks. He is so close to me that I am sometimes tempted to enter the mists of pre-American genealogy to find out whether he may not actually be my cousin.[1]

This passage suggests the curious schizophrenia which is at the base of the American critical evaluation of Poe and his work. Unable to reconcile their own feelings about Poe with the overwhelming acclaim major European writers and critics have granted him ever since Charles Baudelaire wrote, "Je veux faire tous les matins ma prière à Dieu... à mon père, à Mariette et à Poe comme ses intercesseurs,"[2] critics on this side of the Atlantic have always approached Poe as something of a stumbling block. They seem to find no place for Poe in the great American tradition of Hawthorne, Emerson, Melville, and Whitman. They recoil from the vulgarity of his melodramatic effects, from what T.S. Eliot has termed his "slipshod" writing, yet they are strangely fascinated by the influence he has had on European letters. Baudelaire apart, no lesser names than Mallarmé, Huysmans, Valéry, and Dostoievski have hailed Poe's greatness, and the judgments of these men cannot merely be thrust aside with the excuse that their understanding of the English language and English verse techniques is deficient. Hence Poe emerges as a kind of <u>enfant terrible</u>

---

[1]Allen Tate, "Our Cousin, Mr. Poe," <u>The Man of Letters in the Modern World</u> (Ohio, 1964), p. 145.

[2]Charles Baudelaire, <u>Oeuvres posthumes</u> (Paris, 1908), p.135.

on the American literary horizon. He cannot be dismissed as a children's writer, yet there is great difficulty in justifying his reputation and influence. Hence, the American critical attitude toward Poe is perhaps best described as a constant fluctuation between attraction and repulsion--to use the terminology of Eureka. This becomes increasingly evident if we glance briefly at the comments of Poe's American critics.

T.S. Eliot pays Poe the dubious compliment of granting him a "remarkable intellect," but "the intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty." He speaks of Poe's "pre-adolescent mentality," "eccentricity" and "lack of coherence." In the next breath, however, Mr. Eliot, who has mastered the lesson of the French, declares that from a distance Poe presents "a mass of unique shape and impressive size to which the eye continually returns."[3]

Yvor Winters attacks Poe for relying on the "mechanical and startling;" for using art as "a kind of stimulant, ingeniously concocted, which may if one is lucky raise one to a moment of divine delusion." He feels that "Poe is no more a mystic than a moralist; he is an excited sentimentalist" who "tries to endow all with a strangeness, a mystery he does not understand."[4] Yet, Mr. Winters devotes thirty pages to a scathing denunciation of a writer who, he believes, possesses not one worthwhile point.

Floyd Stovall's case is much more favorable toward Poe and his achievement. "His intellect was keen and fertile in ideas, his imagination was rich and active, and his sense of

---

[3]T.S. Eliot, "From Poe to Valéry," To Criticize the Critic (London, 1965), pp. 27-42.

[4]Yvor Winters, "Edgar Allan Poe. A Crisis in the History of American Obscurantism," In Defense of Reason (New York, 1947), pp. 234-261.

literary form...was almost faultless," says Mr. Stovall. Nevertheless, he feels a need to place Poe, to categorize him in a fitting slot. "His position, though in the third rank of writers, is honourable and secure."[5]

Attraction and repulsion, fascination and recoil. American critics seem either to react favorably toward Poe and feel a kind of guilt for their taste, or they react negatively toward him and feel guilt for their dislike. On either side, justification appears to be an essential step in voicing one's opinion about Poe.

Hence Poe is the object of a rare critical predicament. His popularity, his fortune as a writer has mounted steadily since his death. Yet, from the strictly critical point of view, his reputation remains divided in much the same way as it was when Baudelaire championed Poe's work in the face of largely negative American opinion. Since this phenomenon seems to be peculiar to American criticism of Poe and no other American writer and since no one has ever really stood up to this curious schizophrenia, an attempt to trace it to its possible roots may proove an initial step towards an understanding of Poe and his work.

One of the possible sources for the largely negative critical reaction to Poe in America lies in the American critics' refusal to look upon him as a "cosmological" poet--a term which Valéry uses in speaking of Poe. The mark of the cosmological poet, especially the cosmological poet who is prophetic of new modes of thought--one thinks immediately of Blake here--is that he is aware of more than he can effectively symbolize. That is, a poet such as Blake or Poe is aware of a vaster reality, a profounder imaginative realm, than his symbolic equipment will allow him to express. Consequently, his craftsmanship often appears to be bad; his verse slightly unsatisfactory; his prose cryptic. And the critics rush to judgment denouncing such distorted terminology as the phrase

---

[5]Floyd Stovall, "Introduction" The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (Virginia, 1965), p. xxxii.

"most immemorial" which appears in "Ulalume." "Most immemorial" may be faulty English usage, yet it is the only effective terminology available to Poe when he attempts to convey a time out of mind and out of memory--what Poulet calls a time in the "unknown past," a "prenatal epoch"[6]--in an era which is unfamiliar with depth psychology. To approach Poe in this negative way, to go no further than an appraisal of his avowedly imperfect craftsmanship, is to miss the entire creative thrust of his work and vision--a creative thrust which, if we are to believe the French, inspired almost an entire century of French literature.

"Al Aaraaf" which Poe includes among "the crude compositions of my earliest boyhood" reveals one aspect of this creative thrust, together with examples of the distorted syntax and terminology for which he is criticized. Superficially the poem reads like Tennyson borrowing from Shelley, yet, upon closer scrutiny, something totally different emerges.

> Oh! nothing earthly save the ray
> (Thrown back from flowers) of Beauty's eye,
> As in those gardens where the day
> Springs from the gems of Circassy--
> Oh! nothing earthly save the thrill
> Of melody in woodland rill;
> Or (music of the passion-hearted)
> Joy's voice so peacefully departed
> That, like the murmur in the shell,
> Its echo dwelleth and will dwell--[7]

Suffused with the rhetoric of the Romantics, which Poe handles here with obtrusive clumsiness, "Al Aaraaf" is not essentially akin, either in tone or matter, to Shelley's musings upon a "dome of many-splendoured glass"--although there seems to be an initial resemblance in the use of images. Poe's "nothing earthly" is not the Romantic's vision of an otherness which is eternally present in the world and which everyone could see if only the blinding veil were lifted from their eyes.

---

[6]Georges Poulet, Studies in Human Time (New York, 1959), p. 331.

[7]Edgar Allan Poe, "Al Aaraaf," The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (New York, 1938), pp. 992-993. All subsequent references to Poe's tales and poems will be to this edition.

Rather, what Poe describes is similar to the dream vision of the midnight of the day which Baudelaire depicts in "Rêve parisien." Beauty's ray is reflected from flowers, but it is not intrinsically part of them, as the Romantics would have it. Poe's vision is an artificial one "where the day/Springs from the gems," while the poet is conscious of having created both and knows that neither are truly part of external reality. The resemblance to Baudelaire is clear:

> C'étaient des pierres inouies
> Et des flots magiques; c'étaient
> D'immenses glaces éblouies
> Par tout ce qu'elles reflétaient![8]

The central concern here, however, is not with Poe's relationship to either the Romantics or to Baudelaire, but with his prosody and what appears as clumsy syntax. The parentheses of lines two and seven seem, on first reading, merely to dislocate the smooth flow of the lines. Yet, that they are not falacious impositions becomes apparent with closer study. Poe deliberately inserts them so that, standing out on the page, they will echo the tortured thought processes which have gone into the making of the poem. In parentheses, "Thrown back from flowers," takes on a perceptual value, which gives a concrete spatial quality to the thought of 'reflection.' Poe's verbal music does not flow smoothly because he is attempting to lay out the thought on the page. His clumsiness arises from the fact that he is a man trying to think out, on the page, a thought which is not as yet fully clear to him. Yet the roots of what will eventually become Mallarmé's idea of printing out on the page the thought, itself, are clear.

> All hurriedly she knelt upon a bed
> Of flowers: of lilies such as rear'd the head
> On the fair Capo Deucato, and sprang
> So eagerly around about to hang
> Upon the flying footsteps of----deep pride--
> Of her who lov'd a mortal--and so died.
> The Sephalica, budding with young bees,
> Uprear'd its purple stem around her knees.[9]

---

[8] Charles Baudelaire, "Rêve parisien," Les Fleurs du Mal (Paris, 1965), p. 119, ll. 29-32.

[9] "Al Aaraaf," pp. 993-994, ll. 42-49.

The profuseness of the flower imagery here creates such an onslaught on the reader's senses, that he loses hold of the continuity of the poem, and of his own grasp on reality. He is thrust into a psychic and discontinuous world of which Nesace is only the symbol. Poe,is deliberately striving to i induce a feeling of vertigo in his reader and to bring him into an unconscious realm. This he does by bombarding him with rich images, by purposely using a succession of prepositional phrases and seemingly clumsy constructions, which dislocate the syntax and effect a similar dislocation on the reader's perceptual powers. Poe actually lays out the feeling of vertigo on the page, with the falling, yet abrupt rhythms of "upon a bed/Of flowers; of lilies," "On the fair," "around about," "Upon the flying footsteps of" broken by the interruption of "deep pride," the thought of which is only completed after the second 'of' phrase, in "and so died." Superficially this appears to be only clumsy and cryptic verse. Yet, what Poe is attempting even in this early and avowedly imperfect work, is that very thing which will find its logical completion in a work like Mallarmé's "Coup de dés" of which Valéry says: "Il me sembla de voir la figure d'une pensée, pour la première fois placée dans notre espace.... Ici, véritablement, l'étendue parlait, songeait, enfantait des formes temporelles. L'attente, le doute, la concentration étaient <u>choses visibles</u>."[10]

This is what Poe is striving for as early as "Al Aaraaf" and to point out in his work instances of distorted usages is to approach him purely negatively. It is to look at the truly experimental writer with the unseeing eyes of a past and stabilized tradition, so that all divergence from tradition appears not as a striving for something totally novel, but as a failure to achieve the perfection of those who have come before. The technical difficulty which Poe presents to critics provides one source for his emergence as the <u>enfant terrible</u> of American letters.

---

[10]Paul Valéry, "Le coup de dés," <u>Oeuvres</u> (Paris, 1957), volume I, p. 623.

Poe's vision--that is, the thematic core of his work--functions as another stumbling block for his American critics. The crux of this dilemma lies in the American critics' attempt to place Poe in the traditional line of American literature, and their consequent inability to do so. The burden of providing a link between Poe's work and the great American tradition usually falls on his Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. Harry Levin, whose study of Poe is certainly one of the most penetrating to come out of America, would have it that:

> ...the characteristic point of view in American fiction may well be that of a boy, an adolescent initiated into manhood by the impact of his adventures, such as the heroes of Melville and Mark Twain, of Stephen Crane's Red Badge of Courage, William Faulkner's "Bear," and the stories of Ernest Hemingway. And it may not be sufficiently appreciated that all of these have their archetypal predecessor in Poe's single work of book-length, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym.[11]

But if the initiation of a youth into manhood is the characteristic viewpoint of American fiction, Levin does not demonstrate how Pym appreciably changes from the start of the narrative to the point when he disappears into the white mist at its end. Pym's adventures seem to have no maturing effect on him, perhaps because Poe is not so much interested in the journey from adolescence into manhood--a purely novelistic theme--as he is in problems of a different nature.

Edward H. Davidson makes a similar attempt to place Poe in the great American tradition when he writes,"One of the themes of Pym which link it with a variety of writings in American literature, such as Moby Dick, Tom Sawyer, or even Henry James's American, is the development of a simple youth into a mature man."[12] Davidson makes an interesting study of Pym by tracing the theme of deception and attempting to show how the consciousness of a "young and simple-minded boy" evolves into that of "a fully developed man." In his concluding chapter, however, Davidson seems to contradict himself when he points out how far removed Poe is from the great American writers of

---

[11]Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness (New York, 1958),pp.108-10

[12]Edward H. Davidson, Poe--A Critical Study (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p.166.

the nineteenth century.

> Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, James, to name only a few--had their artistic and intellectual birth and being in the fullest American experience. Poe does not conform to any general or basic American design or character; he represents the danger of the literary spokesman who was all his life convinced that nothing existed in the native world about him, but that only by the most arduous transplantation of the European culture can the New World effect any artistic competence and distinction. Thus Poe represents the hypertrophy of an imagination which had only its imported culture to feed upon.[13]

This attempt to place Poe and define him through geographical boundaries may be a symptom of the American anxiety to create a Weltanschauung without appreciating the fact that certain artistic problems are not subject to national limits. Davidson broaches the difficulty but does so negatively. Poe, in his best work, was obviously not concerned with the world around him, yet he was concerned with what later became an international problem for the artist--the problem of finding effective symbolic equations for man's and especially the artist's inner and creative experience.

Following logically from his statement that Poe fed only on an "imported culture," Davidson concludes that "Poe is the archetype of the Romantic mind,"[14] thereby pointing out another reason why Poe remains unbaptised by American critical opinion. Critics on this side of the Atlantic seem to be unable to make a distinction between the Romantic and the Symboliste artist. Allen Tate in his essay on Hart Crane provides a ready example.[15] Romanticism, they seem to feel, is a state of being, while Symbolisme is a state of craft, so that the Romantic artist extends, with no shift of consciousness, into the Symboliste. Hence, Poe is viewed as looking across the ocean to the Romantics and merely extending the Romantic outlook, without achieving the heights of a Shelley or a Wordsworth.

Looking back over an expanse of a hundred years of

---

[13] Davidson, p. 256.

[14] Ibid, p. 257.

[15] Allen Tate, "Hart Crane," The Man of Letters..., pp.283-298.

literature however, it becomes readily evident that Poe is a transitional figure between Romanticism and an art of a totally different nature. Granted that he did his homework on Byron and Coleridge, yet as Edith Sitwell says, "Poe is now derided only by stupid persons." He is the only American poet before Whitman whose work was not "bad and imitative of English poetry."[16] Just as Romanticism developed from the poetry of the Augustan Age and yet was wholly different from it, so the art which Poe heralds finds its roots in Romanticism, while the fruit it bears has little direct resemblance to its origins.

A comparison between the poetry of the Romantics and their poetical stance with that of the Symbolistes--Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valéry--is demonstrative of this point. If we accept that the "romantic agony" is the suffering of self-awareness, then a simple formula for the Romantic might be: I am, I feel, I suffer. A basic equation for this formula would balance the 'I am' with the idealistic vision of the Romantic; the 'I feel' with his art; and the 'I suffer' with the world of external reality.

What the Romantic essentially suffers from is his awareness of the clash between his intuitive flashes of idealism and vision, and the stubborn reality which refuses to let itself be fashioned by this vision. In other words, 'I suffer because I am alienated from a world which is not what I wish it to be and which yet contains the possibility of being that very thing I wish.' The Romantic poet is tortured because his sensitivity isolates him from the world of reality, yet he envisions the possibility of changing that world.

His poetry records the dream visions with which his artistic intuition presents him. When he is optimistic he considers these dream visions as revelations bearing truth. When he is pessimistic or in a state of depression, he looks upon these visions as being merely dreams. Shelley composes "Mont Blanc" or "Stanzas Written in Dejection." His self-awareness extends only as far as making the material of his life, the material of his poem. The Romantic artist may be essentially a demiurge (as Davidson says), creating the world into being,

---

[16]Edith Sitwell, "Preface" The American Genius (London, 1951).

but his vision is always thrust outwards, for his essential idealism leads him to hope for human reform and for an eventual end to the split between the artist and society. Indeed, Shelley's vision of the poet as the "unacknowledged legislator" of the world reveals the Romantics' high optimism about poetry and its role.

Poe's case, and this is what the Symbolistes recognized in him, is vastly different. The agony of self-awareness has become what the Symbolistes term variously as the "delirium of lucidity." Poe suffers from a cleavage between imagination and belief. Like Blake in "There is no Natural Religion," he can imagine that otherness, that sixth sense:

> lll. From a perception of only 3 senses or 3 elements none could deduce a fourth or fifth. ...
> Conclusion. If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again.[16]

Yet Poe's lucidity will not allow him to accept as a reality that which his poetic and imaginative powers have shown him. The world has become a solipcism. There is no more schizophrenia between art and reality, for they are one and the same to an artist who has no social conscience or social idealism. Poe shows no attempt to try and change the external world. He is indifferent to it and his poetry and tales belong to a world which is totally a world of the imagination. Yet the delirium of lucidity will not allow him to believe even in this world, and his stories betray this split in man's innermost depths. Usher and the narrator are parts of one and the same being--the poet who is locked in a dream of his own creation, and yet realizes that it is merely a dream. Poe and his heroes live in a world devoid of even the possibility of revelation, for they are situated in a sphere of exhausted interpretation. Like the state described by Rimbaud in his phrase "Je me crois en enfer, donc j'y suis" and supplemented by "Je est un autre," Poe and his characters are caught in the

---

[16] William Blake, "There is No Natural Religion," The Complete Poetry of William Blake, Modern Library edition, (New York, 1941), p. p. 619.

[17] Arthur Rimbaud, Une Saison en Enfer, Oeuvres (Paris, 1960), p. 220. "Lettre à Georges Izambard," p. 334.

dialectic of the double, the imaginer and the would-be believer, the man and the lucid analyst, the creator and the thinker.

For Poe, the vision or the dream is no longer the image of a vaster moral reality which society can eventually attain. His lucidity will not allow him to accept the vision as anything more than an entirely personal and perhaps even an anti-social experience, which cannot be shared and cannot even be fully trusted.

> Dreams! in their vivid coloring of life
> As in that fleeting, shadowy, misty strife
> Of semblance with reality which brings
> To the delirious eye, more lovely things
> Of Paradise and Love--and all my own!--
> Than young Hope in his sunniest hour hath known.[18]

The poem "Dreams" from which this passage is taken, shows Poe assuming many of the stock phrases, the vocabulary of Romanticism, and even attempting to torment his own existence into a Romantic biography. "OH! that my young life were a lasting dream!" and such phrases as "A chaos of deep passion" appear to be thoroughly Romantic exclamations. In its overall impact, however, and especially in the passage quoted, the shaping power emerges as one quite radically different from the Romantic. Although Poe's stance is an autobiographical one, it is very far from Wordsworth's viewpoint in "Tintern Abbey." Poe makes it very clear that the dream is not the life of reality, nor will reality ever be akin to it, no matter how much the poet would like to believe this. Dreams may be"vivid," but they are afterall only a "coloring" of life, and Poe piles on adjective after adjective to make this point strikingly clear. Dreams are merely a "semblance" of reality, "fleeting, shadowy, misty," and the "strife," the chaos, they present can only be viewed by the "delirious eye," the eye which is willing to probe into unconscious depths. Moreover, unlike the Romantics' dreams, these particular visions cannat be shared. They are "all my own" and do not look outward to society, for as the last line of the poem reveals, these dreams have no connection with

---

[18]Poe, "Dreams," p. 1020-1021.

with external reality and are far different from what "young Hope in his sunniest hour hath known." This closing line could almost be taken as a direct comment on the Romantics' approach to vision.

Poe's viewpoint is not that of the optimistic young poet gazing out on the world and hoping to reform it with the help of a personal vision in which he believes. Rather his poetical standpoint is closer to that of the "wise old wicked man" who recognizes that his dreams, no matter what their beauty or horror, are products of a delirious eye and are only a "semblance" of reality. His belief in the creations of his imagination is only momentary and then, immediately, the critical, lucid double steps in and the I who has created the dream becomes another, a "He." The delirious eye/I who wishes to believe that his dream is a revelation is replaced by the lucid diagnostician who cannot. This is where Poe's sensibility merges into that of the Symboliste poet. He appears as the herald of a new schizophrenic age where existence must be tormented into meaning in the face of a double, a super-ego become skeptic. The dream vision can no longer be projected outward into the world and if any revelation is to emerge from it, it will not be a Romantic one, but one which is almost gratuitous and exists only in poetry itself. It is from this point on that the mark of the Symboliste poet becomes the image of an isolated, asocial being, who sits muttering incantatory phrases over a blank page, for it is from the sounds, the look of words, the stuff of poetry itself, that the angelic voices will speak.

Not only is Poe's sensibility akin to that of the Symbolistes. In his poetic and short story techniques he also begins a trend which finds its culmination in a poem like "L'Après-midi d'un faune." This novel feature is the transition from what can be called "public symbolism" to "private symbolism." A public symbol could be defined as one which has established cultural relevance. Milton, for example, can manipulate the garden of Eden in any way which he pleases, without fearing that the public will find him obscure. He can count on all

or most of his allusions being easily absorbed by the prepared hard core of his own culture. His poetic voice is not largely poetic or personal.

In a civilization, however, which has lost its hold on cultural foundations, the artist must find new equations for experience. Poe looks forward to this kind of civilization as he agonizes over finding the exact private symbol which will allow him to unlock the innermost springs in all hearts and will permit him to render rather than show. This is the Symboliste dilemma of finding the symbolic equivalents which will allow one to communicate a personally intuited reality. The private symbol actually finds its origins in the Romantic movement when one begins to have poetry wherein not everything the poet says is culturally transparent. This poses the problem of an interpretative stumbling block as far as the public is concerned, and Shelley shows his awareness of this when he writes to his publisher concerning "Epipsychidion"--"It is to be published only for the esoteric few," and again in the Advertisement to that poem: "The present poem...is sufficiently intelligible to a certain class of readers without a matter-of-fact history of the circumstances to which it relates; and to a certain other class it must ever remain incomprehensible, from a defect of a common organ of perception for the ideas of which it treats."[19] However, Shelley still gives the reader sufficient hints and even explications which allow his symbols to be readily understood. The very title "Epipsychidion" suggests that the figures he will be dealing with are psychic manifestations, and he provides such revelatory phrases as "this soul out of my soul."

With Poe this trend toward private symbolism becomes more acute and there is little in his poems which so directly reveals the significance of his symbols. A poem like "Eulalie" relies on associative strings, verbal and pattern play, and esoteric analogies, to convey the idea that Poe, like Shelley, is dealing here with a psychic figure. This heavy dependence on tools which

---

[19]Percy Bysshe Shelley, Selected Poems, Essays and Letters (New York, 1944), pp. 361-366.

are purely poetical, and the use of highly esoteric symbols leads to a poem such as "L'Après-midi d'un faune" of which it is impossible to make a prose paraphrase, for it is composed of the matter of poetry itself.

Yet Poe was not faced by a culture prepared to accept this type of poetry. Unlike the twentieth century, the nineteenth was not receptive to the manipulation of private symbols and was uneducated in the symbolic and anagogic phases. Therefore, Poe capitalized, as Davidson points out, on the paraphenalia available to him in the "popular gift annals and periodicals of the day"[20]--the corpse, the tomb, the mourning survivor.[20] Poe's tombs and corpses, however, are not those of "Night Thoughts," nor of the gothic writers. They have far wider implications as they fathom into man's unconscious depths only to discover the pitch blackness of total disintegration.

Furthermore, as Northrope Frye remarks, when Poe wishes to use private symbolism, he does not, like Hawthorne, or for that matter Shelley, make excuses for it: "Poe is clearly a more radical abstractionist than Hawthorne, which is one reason why his influence on our century is more immediate."[21] This ability to make radical abstractions, to consciously use private symbols in an age where there is no assurance that private symbols are communicable, is what removes Poe from the position of a Romantic writer and brings him into the realm of the Symbolistes. It is telling that he wrote in his review of Hawthorne's "Twice-Told Tales: "For the fullest satisfaction, the story must be read with an art akin to that of its creator."[22]--thereby revealing his fear that his private symbolism might not be readily communicable.

Another element in Poe's make-up which likens him to the Symboliste writers and makes him the revolutionary transitional

---

[20]Davidson, p. 105.

[21]Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism,(Princeton, 1957), p. 139.

[22]Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Works, Raven edition,(New York, 1902), vol. 7, pp. 329-352.

figure that he was, lies in the self-consciousness he applied to the act of creation. His poetic stance is the I-he relationship, the artist watching himself create, and making the material of his creation, the act of creation itself. The circle of narcissicism is complete--at least as far as the idealized self-portrait is concerned. The artist begins with himself, consciously observes himself in the unconscious process of creation and then expresses, with full self-criticism, the creative process. It is this consciousness of self, creating vision, which separates Poe from the Romantics, for living in a world deprived of revelation, he recognized that creativity had become merely a question of juggling effects. Hence, rather than defences of poetry--a product of a Romantic age--Poe composes explications of a deductive system for making it. He is the self-critical craftsman, as opposed to the self-aware demiurge. The Romantic artistshas given way to an artist of a different kind.

Although many American critics have questioned the rationale of Baudelaire's idolatrous devotion to Poe, within this context, the French poet's attraction to the American's mind becomes clear. Baudelaire's situation was identical to Poe's. The child of a Romantic age, he went to school to Victor Hugo, only to find that his mode of perception was vastly different from the masters. A shift of consciousness had taken place. Valéry calls this shift in his "Situation de Baudelaire," the introduction of a classical mind into Romanticism. In other words, Romanticism has developed a formalistic conscience. "C'est en quoi Baudelaire, quoique romantique d'origine, et même romantique par ses goûts, peut quelquefois faire figure d'un classique. ...<u>classique est l'écrivain qui porte un critique en soi-même, et qui l'associe intimement à ses travaux.</u>"[23] A self-criticality has been introduced to the Romantic mind, a self-criticality which was to become the one point common to all the poets of the coming age. "Le classique implique donc

[23]Paul Valéry, "Situation de Baudelaire," <u>Oeuvres</u> I, (Paris, 1957), p. 604.

des actes volontaires et réfléchis qui modifient une production naturelle, conformément à une conception claire et rationelle de l'homme et de l'art.[24]

It is not so much the nature of the artistic product which links Poe to Baudelaire, but a similarity in artistic stance. There is a logical development from one poet to the other. Poe brought self-consciousness back into the artistic process, allowing for the re-introduction of "irony" into literature, and permitting the artist to achieve that distance of a "god paring his fingernails" which has become so important in the twentieth century. The kind of irony we are accustomed to in this age can only begin with the poet's own realization or intuition that his own materials are corrupt. With the awareness that every symbol is two-edged, poetry becomes aware of its dark side as well as its light, and the poet realizes that his materials are tainted. This provides the death knell to Romanticism, for when the two sides of the situation are recognized, there can be no more idealistic optimism. The poet's only possible convalescence for his dark knowledge is to treat his tainted material with a kind of ironic detachment. The poet's recognition that the materials of his art are corrupt begins with Poe and the late nineteenth century decadents, and the curative comes only in the late works of T.S. Eliot.

Aware of the dual nature of symbols, Poe was, like Baudelaire, fully self-conscious and self-critical where his craft was concerned. "Jamais le problème de la littérature n'avait été jusqu'à Edgar Poe, examiné dans ses prémisses, réduit à un problème de psychologie, abordé au moyen d'une analyse où la logique et la mécanique des effets étaient délibérément employées.[25] With Poe, the artistic product becomes the product of a craftsman who has mastered the art of rhetoric in its traditional sense. The effect to be produced on the audience is calculated. The moving power of certain sounds and symbols

---

[24]Valéry, Ibid, p. 604.

[25]Valéry, Ibid, p. 606.

is fully realized so that the artist must find only the necessary combination of effects which will allow him to unlock the innermost springs of all hearts. Whether Poe achieved the full extent of his ideal is of course highly debatable, as is the question of his actually having written "The Raven" as he defines in his "Philosophy of Composition." This, however, is irrelevant, for the importance of Poe from our viewpoint, is as a transitional figure who initiated the mechanics of composition with a purely rational eye and laid the foundations for an artistic outlook which was to become the norm in a subsequent age.

Poe's sensibility was not that of a Romantic and the American critics' failure to recognize this results in their inability to place him. His fate, like that of Hart Crane, remains in being an <u>enfant terrible</u> because of the critics' blindness to the difference between the Romantic and the Symboliste, self-awareness and self-criticality, self as subject and the act of creation as subject.

LE POETE DES NERFS

In the first part of this study an attempt was made to lay a foundation, to find a perspective, which would allow for the fullest possible appreciation of Poe and his craft. It seems that this perspective must be a retrospective one, for only with the tools available to us in the present can we grasp the full significance of Poe's artistry. Now that Mallarmé has evoked "le délire de la page blanche," we can begin to comprehend Poe's agony in "Al Aaraaf" of laying out the thought on the page. Now that the self-conscious craftsman, Daedalus, fashioning his maze, has become the image of the artist, Poe's striving to manipulate the unconscious responses of his reader comes into clearer focus. Finally, it is only now that we have attained the necessary sophistication to rid ourselves of the Romantic hangover, that we are capable of considering the artifact as an entity in itself, wholly divorced from the biography of its creator. This last qualification permits us to examine Poe for what he really is--not a subject for psychoanalysis, a victim of pathology, but the original "poète des nerfs."

In his introduction to Histoires Extraordinaires, Baudelaire says of Poe:

> Ce n'est pas par ses miracles matériels, qui pourtant ont fait sa renommée, qu'il lui sera donné de conquérir l'admiration des gens qui pensent, c'est...par ce génie tout spécial, par ce tempérament unique qui lui a permis de peindre et d'expliquer, d'une manière impeccable, saisissante, terrible, l'exception dans l'ordre moral. --Diderot, pour prendre un exemple entre cent, est un auteur sanguin; Poe est l'écrivain des nerfs, et même de quelque chose de plus,--et le meilleur que je connaisse.
>
> ...
>
> Aucun homme, je le répète, n'a raconté avec plus de magie les exceptions de la vie humaine et de la nature,--les ardeurs de curiousité de la convalescence, --les fins de saisons chargées de splendeurs énervantes, les temps chaud, humides et brumeux, où le vent du sud amollit et détend les nerfs comme les cordes d'un instrument, où les yeux se remplissent de larmes qui ne viennent pas du coeur,--l'hallucination laissant d'abord place au doute, bientôt convaincue et raisonneuse comme un livre,--l'absurde s'nstallant dans l'intelligence et la gouvernant avec une épouvantable logique,--l'hytérie usurpant la place de la volonté, la contradiction établie entre les nerfs et l'esprit, et l'homme désaccordé au point d'exprimer la douleur par le rire. Il

analyse ce qu'il y a de plus fugitif, il soupèse l'imponderable et décrit, avec cette manière minutieuse et scientifique dont les effets sont terribles, tout cet imaginaire qui flotte autour de l'homme nerveux et le conduit à mal.[1]

Poe's heroes live in a highly contemporary world controlled by nerves. Overly sensitive to their environment, their nerves are always in a state of derangement. The Hero of the "MS Found in a Bottle" suffers from a nervous restlessness. "A Descent into the Maelstrom," which explores that dislocated sense of vertigo, the feeling of falling into a depth of nothingness, so similar to the modern phenomenon of the "abyss" which Sartre describes in his La Nausée, contains on its opening page the suggestive sentence: "It took less than a single day to change these hairs from a jetty black to white, to weaken my limbs, and to unstring my nerves, so that I tremble at the least exertion, and am frightened at a shadow."[2] Usher, the narrators of "Morella," "Berenice," "Ligeia," and a score of others, all suffer from a neurasthenia which leads to an exaggeration of a total dismissal of one element in their make-up or surroundings. The psychic mandala, representative of man's integrated state of being,[3] is upset and Poe's heroes, like Pym, travel in their bateau ivre to a point buried deep in man's unknown and chaotic unconscious. For Poe, as for Baudelaire and Rimbaud, the voyage in a bateau ivre provides a perfect synthesizing image, since these three writers will travel--to use Baudelaire's phrase--"au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau."

"Il mime le mouvement qui jettera l'esprit, massacrées les haleurs de la pensée logique et des traditions sensorielles, dans le déchaînement criard des couleurs profondes, dans la substance qui s'ouvre comme, au-delà des fleuves tranquilles, une orageuse et massive mer."[4] This is what Yves Bonnefoy

---

[1]Charles Baudelaire, "Préface," Histoires Extraordinaires (Paris,), pp. 23-24.

[2]Poe, p. 227.

[3]C.G. Jung, Psyche and Symbol (New York, 1958), pp. 316-326.

[4]Yves Bonnefoy, Rimbaud par lui-même (Paris, 1961), p. 56.

sees as the substance of the bateau ivre image. In essence, he is describing that "dérèglement de tous les sens" which Rimbaud mentions in a letter to Paul Demeney[5] and which is the substance of so many of Poe's tales, as his heroes travel the turbulent seas of the unconscious.

Poe belongs with the poètes des nerfs in a further sense. Like these writers, he suffers from a dedication to a lucidity which fordes him to recognize that his visions, his dreams, find their beginnings in the quagmire, the manure heap of the human soul itself materially limited because it can only be reached by a manipulation of sense equations. There is no normal man in Poe's theatre of characters, or rather all are normal men, for l'homme moyen sensuel, when placed in particular circumstances, always suffers from the orderly derangement of the senses. Launched on his bateau ivre, the hero of the "MS" insists that he is a reasonable man of science: "Upon the whole, no person could be less liable than myself to be led away from the severe precincts of truth by the ignes fatui of superstition."[6] Poe is at great pains to show that his hero is truly a totally rational being, and yet this reasonable hero sails to the deepest imaginings of darkness possible to man, and he finally disappears into the whirlpool of annihilation. Similarly, there could be no more reasonable man than the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" yet he testifies in all sincerity that he has seen a woman entombed alive, and an entire house swallowed up in the blackness of a tarn.

Like Rimbaud, Dostoievski, Huysmans and Kafka, Poe is an expert in the field of morbid psychology, where a particular psychic derangement serves as an epiphany of mankind. Des Esseintes, Huysmans decadent hero, direct descendent of Usher, and spokesman for all hypernervous sensibilities, keeps only one book in his favorite chamber--The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. The reasons Huysmans gives for his excessive

---

[5]Arthur Rimbaud, Oeuvres (Paris,1960), p.346.

[6]Poe, p. 118.

admiration of Poe sum up certain aspects of Poe as poète des nerfs.

Plus que tout autre, celui-là peut-être répondait par d'intimes affinités aux postulations méditatives de des Esseintes.

Si Baudelaire avait déchiffré dans les hiéroglyphes de l'âme le retour d'âges des sentiments et des idées, lui avait, dans la voie de la psychologie morbide, plus particulièrement scruté le domaine de la volonté.

En littérature, il avait, le premier, sous ce titre emblématique: "Le démon de la Perversité", épié ces impulsions irrésistibles que la volonté subit sans les connaître et que la pathologie cérébrale explique maintenant d'une façon à peu près sûre; le premier aussi, il avait sinon signalé, du moins divulgé l'influence dépressive de la peur qui agit sur la volonté, de même que les anesthésiques qui paralysent la sensibilité et que le curare qui anéantit les éléments nerveux moteurs; c'était sur ce point, sur cette léthargie de la volonté, qu'il avait fait converger ses études, analysant les effets de ce poison moral, indiquant les symptômes de sa marche, les troubles commençant avec l'anxiété, se continuant par l'angoisse, éclatant enfin dans la terreur qui stupéfie les volitions, sans que l'intelligence, bien qu'ébranlée, fléchisse.

...

Convulsées par d'héréditaires névroses, affolées par des chorées morales, ses créatures ne vivaient que par les nerfs.[7]

Poe's "delirium of lucidity" leads him to a study of abnormal psychology--a state wherein man's deepest unconscious motives and sensations take on the guise of logic and realism. A prime example of his use of the techniques and psychological insights which were to lay the foundations for such later writers as Kafka and Dostoievski, is "The Tell-Tale Heart." The tale begins with the customary mention of the hero's nervousness, which is balanced by a supreme logic and cerebral calm.

True!--nervous--very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses--not destroyed--not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. Howmthen, am I mad?

---

[7] J. Huysmans, A Rebours (Paris,), p. 252-254.

Hearken! and observe how healthily--how calmly I can tell you the whole story.[8]

The artistic approach here, is one which came to be Dostoievski's trademark--the inadvertent public self-confession of a man whose madness reveals itself in an excess of logic and lucidity, the logic of a Dupin. There are two levels of meaning at work in the tale to produce the narrator's inadvertent self-confession: the story which the narrator means to tell, and the story he tells as he inadvertantly reveals himself and demonstrates his guilt and madness. Immediately Poe introduces the exaggerated element in the narrator's make-up and this will be precisely the one that backfires. The hero's neurasthenia has caused his hearing to become so acute, that he can hear everything in heaven, earth and hell--everything, if we wish to use Freudian terminology, that his super-ego, ego and id can tell him. The orderly derangement of the senses is rendered in this way, and the hero sets out to describe what proves to be a psychological landscape. It is important to realize--as Northrop Frye points out--that Poe is a writer of tales, not short stories. The difference is analgous to that between the novel and the romance. In the romance, the only character with three-dimensional value is the hero, and he attains it only if we interpret his environment as a manifestation of his inner being. Hence, the hero of the "Tell-Tale Heart" as he embarks on his confession, inadvertantly reveals in the significant detail which Poe piles up, his own psychological state of disorder.

The hero admits that what drove him to murder was no revenge motif, no hatred, no desire for material gain, but rather an eye--an Evil Eye. "I think it was his eye! yes it was this! One if his eyes resembled that of a vulture--a pale blue eye with a film over it."[9] In this significant realistic manipulation of detail for symbolic purposes, Poe deepens his psychological analysis. The eye gains exaggerated proportions

---

[8]Poe, p. 303

[9]Poe, p. 303

in the narrator's mind and becomes analgous to his overly acute sense of hearing. One of the elements within the narrator is distorted and along with it one of the features of his environment. The disbalance is complete. Symbolically, the eye becomes a mirror for the narrator, and it is "evil" only because it reflects his own chaotic and degenerate depths. The health he boasts of reveals itself as false, as he sets out, like William Wilson, to destroy his own reflection in his victim's eye. He recognizes the groan the old man makes, as one akin to his own: "It was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me."[10]

When he finally charges in to make the kill, the two elements which have grown out of proportion increase in intensity. The sound of the old man's heart, which is perhaps a symbol here for a kind of diabolical and unceasing energy, mingles with the sight of the evil eye, until finally the bloody deed is done. And here Poe begins his exploration of the psychology of guilt and the gratuitous act--two themes which have occupied major literature since his day.

The motiveless murder is complete, yet the ear which could hear all things in heaven, earth and hell manifests its deranged power. The sound of the beating heart rings in the murderer's ear with such intensity that it drives him to self-confession. It is interesting to note why Poe uses the ear and the heart here in preference over other possible human organs, for it reveals his conscious knowledge of the dark side, the ironic side, of symbols. The ear is usually thought of as the instrument through which man perceives the music of the spheres, the harmony of the universe--in a poetic context. Similarly the traditional Romantic and Victorian use of the heart is as an emblem of human goodness. Here, however, the ear is the power through which man percieves the diabolical tone of his own heart--a heart

---

[10]Poe, 304.

whose passion is destructive. And conscience, the super-ego, the "heaven" the hypertrophied ear was capable of hearing battles with the sound of hell, the depths of man's instinctual and destructive power, until the narrator, listening on earth, leads himself to his own doom, caught in a web of his own imaginings. The gratuitous act has found its logical conclusion in self-annihilation. Raskolnikov fulfills the circle of murder, guilt and confession in an a-Christian world.

Dostoievski praised Poe for two qualities, his "psychological subtlety" and his "fantastic realism"[11] in a preface to "The Tell-Tale Heart" and two other tales. It is readily evident how Poe's psychological subtlety is similar to Dostoievski's on a different scale and how an affinity exists between the minds of the two men. As for Poe's fantastic realism, Chekhov and Andreev seem to have joined Dostoievski in ready applause for Poe's technique. In the same preface Dostoievski wrote that Poe's imagination consists in the "power of details." Poe's technique of building suspense through the use of realistic detail in a totally fantastical situation is a well-known cliché among critics. Few, if any, however, have seen it necessary to attempt an explanation, at the very least a speculation, of the reason why Poe uses minute points of detail in the construction of his tales. Poe was well-aware that he was working with the stuff of man's unconscious, that is, the inner depths which he conceals from civilization. He was manipulating the stuff of vision, the stuff that dreams are made of, yet unlike the Romantics he seemed to find it necessary to clothe these visions, perhaps to obscure them, in a mass of realistic detail. Nevertheless, Poe was not attempting to present reality and dream in one breath--a Zola cum Blake effort. The reason for his use of realistic detail may lie in the same area as an explanation of Kafka's technique. Between these two <u>poètes des nerfs</u>, there is much common ground.

Both suffered from a dedication to lucidity which made them consciously aware of the fact that their visions found

---

[11]Vladimir Astrov, "Dostoievski on Edgar Allan Poe," American Literature, XIV, pp. 70-74.

their base in the "frog-spawn" of the human soul, rather than in the area of transcendental revelation. Both were explorers into some nether region of the soul or psyche, but the cornerstone of their vision did not lie in the misty realms of the beyond. For Kafka and Poe, all men are subject to irrational dreams and rational actions. Every being holds in himself something of the madman, something of the crypt, something of the unconscious. Hence, both the visions of Poe and Kafka are firmly grounded in an existential predicament and they are students of what Nietzsche calls "back-stairs psychology."

When Kafka sets out with the utmost logical precision to create the chaotic world of the unconscious and of dream, he succeeds, by the accumulation of naturalistic detail, in giving this otherwise strictly unseeable world, the aura of waking reality. Poe's case is much the same. His so-called horror tales, whether they be tales of living inhumation, or tales analysing the psychology of a murderous madman, are an attempt to break the wall between dream and reality, between death and life, between unconscious existence and conscious life. His symbols may be rather gothic, but he realizes that the only way to, so to speak, "hook" the reader, to manipulate him into a position where he will accept the solid reality of dream, of the unconscious and of death--Baudelaire's inconnu--is to present the strictly unseeable in terms of the immediately recognizable. Once the reader, through this use of naturalistic detail, feels himself secure in a still recognizable world, the bateau ivre is well on its way to the depths of the human psychic whirlpool. It is only when the voyage is complete that he realizes how precarious was his balance and how thin the dividing line between dream and reality actually is.

It should be pointed out that although this technique of using realistic detail in a world of dream psychology seems rather transparent to us and has become something of a poetical museum piece, in Poe's time it was a striking innovation. The proof of this is that it has launched so much literature

particular to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A ready example of this technique at work can be seen in the Jane Guy episode of The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. Before embarking on the most hallucinative part of his artistic voyage, Poe builds a solid foundation of realistic detail. He describes the structure of the Jane Guy, the nature of the land Pym sees, the species of birds encountered, until the reader feels he is once more firmly grounded in reality. Hence, he accepts the total blackness of the inhabitants of the last island Pym visits, their fear of white, the living inhumation of Pym and Peters, and finally the journey into the cataract of whiteness which closes the narrative. It is only when the voyage is over that he realizes the suggestiveness of Poe's technique use of symbols and their wide ramifications. Reality merges into the heart of darkness and man's experience of the unconscious, until he disappears into an apocalypse of mystical knowledge which can only lead to the end of all possible expression. The success of Poe's technique, which is essentially a discontinuous one, depends on the reader fo following up the symbolic undertone of the narrative in the same materialistic spirit in which he grasped the daylight details.

VOYAGE TO THE END OF A DREAM

Poe's vision has its core in the artist's experience of the act of creation. The world he explores in the majority of his tales and suggests in his poems, presents a tension between dream, the unconscious birthplace of imaginative powers, and waking reality, the sphere of lucid self-critical craftsmanship. In the realm of dream, the unconscious existence of man comes to the fore, and obsessions, uncontrollable desires, inexplicable horrors, vaporous memories, and fantastical imaginings are given free play. Time in this sphere is far removed from the waking time of the clock or the time of duration. Rather, Poe's dream world exists in a time out of time, which has no place in the recognizable past, present, or future. "Incapable of finding a place in the present, these dreams are timeless incapable of finding a place in the recognizable past, in chronology or history. ...Being of no time, they seem to belong to an epoch that transcends time."[1] The irrational realm of dream, which plays a central role in Poe's vision, is akin to the creator's achieved work in that it ranges itself, like the work of art, in a timeless sphere. Yet Poe's dream world is also the world of death, for out of time, death is the furthest extension of the unconscious sphere, and like it, this final state cannot be fully apprehended by waking reason. Hence, on one side of the pendulum of Poe's vision, we find dream, the unconscious, memory, art, and death symbolically equated.

Opposed to this timeless world of dream, death, the unconscious, and art, in Poe's dialectic, is the waking sphere of daily life, consciousness, rational actions and thoughts, and lastly, science. This second realm is a rigorous appeal to the waking intelligence. Poe's characters,

---

[1] Georges Poulet, Studies in Human Time (New York, 1959), p. 331.

however, are inevitably caught in the tension between these two kinds of reality, for their existence is composed of a particular genre of hallucinative dreams and a waking consciousness constantly haunted by deductive systems and the memories of these dreams. Continually before them is the fear that at one point they will no longer awaken from the dream and will thence be permanently caught in the eternally unknowable, in the processes of degeneration and dying.

But Poe's work does not present merely a simple tension between dream and waking, between the unconscious and consciousness, between death and life. Rather, his work demonstrates an overwhelming desire to attain free movement between these two aspects of existence. The rational man, in full possession of his consciousness, wishes to enter the misty realms of the unconscious and of irrational dreams, without being deprived of his lucidity, of his waking logic. Poe's stance is that of an explorer, who desires to penetrate and examine the deepest reaches of the imagination, the world of dream and the unconscious, and at the same time, remain in full control of his waking reason. It is in this sense that his vision finds its core in the artistic process of creation, for it is only the artist who can travel freely between the usually conflicting realms of consciousness and unconsciousness, of death and life, and yet, at all times, have control of his rational powers. Into the world of imagination, of dream and the great memory stored, the artist brings the power of self-criticism. He is at all times in full possession of his waking identity, yet he journeys to the end of a dream, to the unconscious depths of man, to the depths of self. He can play with consciousness, something which only the artistic process allows.

Poe's vision is a prophecy of an art which was to become the trademark of a later era, when the artist and scientist

joined to produce the creative, yet self-critical craftsman--a Dupin, "creative and resolvent," voyaging into the land of intuition and unconscious motivation, while maintaining the lucidity of waking reason. It must be remembered, however, that Dupin, with his light-hearted, gamesome approach, is an idealization. Poe, the man, suffers from this so-called "game" of exploration, for at the core of his existential situation, at the roots of his spiritual biography, there is always the nagging fear that one day he will travel a little too far into the unconscious world, and like Usher, reach the point of no return. This fear, then, is Poe's existential base, an anxiety which gives his vision its peculiar effective power.

The tales embody Poe's vision and explore the various ramifications of the duality between dream and waking, together with the possibility of travelling freely between the two states. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" several aspects of the problem are examined.

"Usher" begins with the entry of one particular kind of Poe character, the rational homme moyen sensuel, who serves as narrator and reasonable touchstone to an irrational action. In his symbolic implication, he is the conscious mind travelling into the realms of unconscious dream, and he represents one side of reality. The scene is a traditional one for Poe--"a dull, dark and soundless day in the autumn of the year." Suggestive of the atmosphere of the tale, the darkness and silence are also prerequisites for man's entry into the nighttime and silent world of dream, while autumn is the season of transformation from life into death, from the waking light of reason, into the dark and turbulent sphere of the unconscious. For the reasonable narrator, the scene is devpid of any poetic sentiment "with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible." He can compare his feeling "to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium--the bitter lapse into every-day life--the hideous dropping off

of the veil."[2]

Poe's psychology is acute. To the conscious mind, the journey into the farthest reaches of the unconscious is far from pleasant, for Poe's unconscious world is a chaotic realm, horrific in its ugliness and divorce from ordinary human values. It is not the enjoyable reverie or day-dream of the opium taker, but rather what follows upon it--a period of what Hopkins would call "slack," a descent into the abyss, a dropping off of the veil, which reveals the full horror of degeneracy, of the charnal house. From any point of view, the loathsomeness of the scene is the same, as the narrator readily discovers. He is incapable of explaining the effect the view has on him--"It was a mystery all insoluble."--for he is only one part of the duality which Usher and his sister complete. Only the author, and through the tale, the reader, are in full possession of the knowledge of both sides.

Poe shows the narrator fighting desperately to keep his conscious grasp on things, as he pushes further into the realm of dream; "There can be no doubt that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition--for why should I not so term it?--served mainly to accelerate the increase itself."[3] He tries to shake off "what must have been a dream," yet he cannot help feeling that "about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity--an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn--a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden hued."[4]

As he enters into all that is irrational in humanity, the common-sensical man quickly intuits that the unconscious world has no affinity with the air of heaven, with anything that is concerned with mystical revelation. Poe's particular

---

[2]Poe, "Usher," p. 231.

[3]Ibid, p. 232.

[4]Ibid, p. 233.

vision of the unconscious is a peculiarly material one, based on existential phenomena. Dark, degenerate, and claustrophobid, it is the Sartrian world of hell on earth, which permits of no exit to those who have become entangled in its depths. But this is not to be the fate of the narrator of "Usher." It is rather the destiny of his double, Usher, himself.

The deceptive crack which the narrator observes in the front of the house and which extends from its roof into the waters of the tarn, bears important symbolic overtones. Barely visible, it represents the schizophrenia of man, who is split into his unconscious and conscious parts--the separation of waking reality and dream. Within this particular context, it suggests the two aspects of human make-up, which the narrator and Usher represent, as consciousness makes its sojourn into the heart of darkness. The crack is only "barely" visible now, because the split between Usher and the narrator has not as yet developed into its full potential. When it does, destruction will ensue.

Before the conscious observer can make contact with his dark side, he must pass through a labyrinthian maze of "dark and intricate passages," reminiscent of William Wilson's evening search to find his double. Poe seems to be fully aware of the significance of the labyrinth as an image of man's journey into unconscious depths, at the heart of which he will find the savage and fearful minotaur. But the destructive powers of the minotaur are yet to be revealed. First the narrator must come into relationship with Usher, the epitome of the neurasthenic and decadent mind which is quickly succumbing to the overwhelming force of dream.

Usher's world is the world of the <u>poètes maudits</u>, who inhabit a damned universe, which they sense must ultimately destroy them. "I <u>must</u> perish in this deplorable folly," exclaims Usher, recognizing his impending doom. From one point of view,

Usher contains in himself the schizophrenic duality which is Poe's theme. He is the decadent artist, entrapped by his own "delirium of lucidity," and as such, he represents Poe's fear of what could be the outcome of his own journey into dream. His art consists of fantastical abstractions and hysterical improvisations, which he creates from the material of the unconscious, itself, and which, logically enough, the reasonable narrator cannot comprehend. The only one of his pictures which is shadowed forth in recognizable symbols is one representing a long, white vault, far below the earth, and containing no exit--the Sartrian hell, deep in the abyss of the unconscious, whose radiant and artificial whiteness is the color of destruction.

Usher's twin sister, the Lady Madeline, is a material emanation of the abyss within him, which will ultimately destroy him. His "delirium of lucidity," represented in what the narrator calls his "intense mental collectedness and concentration," and which he attains only in moments of the "highest artificial excitement," is the quality which allows him to be fully aware of his impending doom. And Usher's destruction must come, for he has allowed himself to become too entangled in the unconscious world of dream. He has lost himself completely in that labyrinth from which there is no escape, for he has attempted the impossible. This "impossible" is materially embodied by the living inhumation of his emanation, Madeline. Striving for life in death, for full control of consciousness in the unconscious world, Usher has proceeded too far into the world of dream ever to return. He confronts his beast in the labyrinth; he meets his destruction, as the dead dragon returns to life, and Madeline reasises from the tomb. Annihilation can only follow, for Usher has pursued his dream to the farthest depths of the abyss. What he finds at the end of his journey is that the voyage has killed his soul, his psyche, imaged forth in Madeline. Just as in "The Oval Portrait" the painter kills his wife, his

youthful soul, by trying to arrest life on the canvas, so Usher attempts a similar impossibility by burying his soul alive, only to find that from this point, there is no return imaginable. The House of Usher, now cracked to the full, and at one with its master, must fall.

Yet, there is a strange dichotomy at work here. Although the narrator, who is in many ways Usher's double, has made this journey into unconscious depths along with Usher, he emerges from them unharmed and unchanged. Poe's vision is complete. The narrator, armed with full consciousness, has made a similar voyage into the labyrinth, yet Daedalus's string, the ingenuity of the detached craftsman, has always been with him. He has never given up his grasp on conscious realities. He has entered the labyrinth, but only as an observer, so that his escape is assured. Having conquered his beast in the form of the tale within a tale, having explored the furthest reaches of dream, he can still emerge with his consciousness intact. He wakes from the dream, only to find that his identity is unchanged, that he is in full control of conscious powers and has been so all along. In him one sees the prime reason why so many of Poe's central characters suffer no development, no change.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is a key tale for an understanding of Poe's vision, because it contains two of his central themes, in their symbolic manifestation. When the narrator of the tale states, "If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher," he is suggesting what Poe himself attempted to do in his art. Poe's work reveals a man striving to find the concrete material tools which will allow him to give expression to a wholly new idea. Like the narrator who cannot quite comprehend what Usher's art signifies, yet is strongly moved by its effect, Poe was no fully aware of the working of the symbolizing process, which he intuited as being one of the most effective of artistic techniques. Yet, transitionalyfigure that he was, he succeeded in exploring an entire new area of human consciousness with his unperfected

tools.

The ideas he paints are those symbolically suggested in "Usher." On the one hand, there is the case of the narrator who achieves the ultimate goal of the self-conscious artist, and exemplifies the possibility of attaining free movement between conscious and unconscious realms, between life and death, between the frames of mind which produce rational science and imaginative art. He is an initial manifestation of the mind which conceived Eureka and glorified the power of intuition, the power of lucidly climbing the ladder with invisible steps, with the final aim of creating a totally coherent and rational cosmology. On the other hand, here is the story of Usher, and all its implications. Usher is the representation of Poe's fear that to follow the dream, the unconscious to its logical conclusion is to invite destruction. From this point there is no awakening, no possibility of maintaining individual identity, for all individuality is lost in a whirlpool of destructive insight. The dialectic is at work--a dialectic whose resolution Poe could look upon in his final achievement with a relative calm.

"In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of all Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation."[5]

To grasp the full significance of this proclamation, which is the very core of Eureka, it is helpful to look to the occult meaning of numbers as represented in the Tarot--the bedrock of symbolic values. To suggest the original unity of the first thing, and that final destructive unity to which all things return, Poe continually uses the term oneness. In the Tarot, the number one represents:

> Beginning, initiative, originality, unity, singleness, isolation, and the like. In the Qabalah it is called the Crown to show that 1 represents the determining, ruling, directive and volitional aspect of consciousness. The Crown is known also as the Primal Will. The same Hebrew philosophy calls this number, the Hidden Intelligence, to show that this primary mode of consciousness is concealed behind all veils of name and form. This is the consciousness of the true Self or I AM--

---

[5]Poe, Eureka (Boston, 1884), p.2.

the onlooker, seeing creation through countless eyes, manifesting itself through innumerable personalities. Ageless wisdom teaches that all things are manifestations or projections in time and space of the powers of the I AM. In short the I AM or number 1, is the essence, substance, energy and consciousness expressed in all forms. Everything in the universe is the self-expression of the I AM. This is the first principle, the primary existence, the First Mover. In and through human personality it manifests as the waking Self-consciousness.[6]

Thus, the original unity, the initial "oneness" of which Poe speaks, emerges as his vision of not only the mind of God, but the mind of the artist, who can manifest himself through innumerable personalities and maintain full self-consciousness at all times. Freud makes an observation concerning the modern artist which clarifies this idea: "The psychological novel in general probably owes its peculiarities to the tendency of modern writers to split up their ego by self-observation into many component egos, and in this way to personify the conflicting trends in their own mental life in many heroes."[7] From the artistic mind, the original oneness which acts as Prime Mover, arises the secondary cause--the split. The significance of the number 2 the Tarot defines as:

Duplication, reflection, receptivity, dependence, alternation, antagonism, and the like. Qabalists call it Wisdom, the reflection of the perfect self-consciousness of the I AM. Wisdom is the mirror wherein the I AM sees itself. The number 2 is also named Illuminating Intelligence. It is that which illuminates the personal mind. It is the aspect of universal consciousness which manifests through human personality as grasp of the inner principles of the nature of the one Conscious Energy.[8]

Hence, the number 2, the secondary cause, appears as the principle of reflection and disparity. It is that principle which leads to antagonism and disunity. In the I/He relationship, the secondary cause is the "He" which mirrors the I and gives

---

[6]Paul Foster Case, The Tarot (New York, 1947), p. 8.

[7]Sigmund Freud, "Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming," Character and Culture (New York, 1963), p. 41.

[8]Case, pp.8-9

birth to the idea of the double. The obvious symbol in Poe's tales of this schizophrenic split in man, himself, is the feminine psychic figure--Madeline, Ligeia, Morella, and Berenice. Poe's women are always weak characters because they are merely shadowy emanations, man's own mirror image. They reflect internal, psychic disparity in the male hero, but more importantly, they also point the way to the annihilation of the world order, which rests unacknowledged within man's dark incomprehensible side. Poe's women, then are partial--Adam's rib, torn from the dark side of the male, rational world. They are mirrors of the dark knowledge which man contains in himself, and when the parts meet, when the hero faces the secret of his own abyss, when Usher faces Madeline, destruction is the inevitable result.

For Poe this inescapable annihilation is a return to unity, but the unity, this time, is not the original oneness, Rather this is a mixture of this oneness and what the Tarot means by the number zero. "It is that which was, is and shall be forever; but it is nothing we can name."[9] Man cannot fully understand this inevitable annihilation which is a return to some unfathomable kind of unity. "Monos and Una" presents one possible intuited explanation of what comes after this inevitable finality, as the "I AM" talks to his "reflection," yet it is only one attempt to try to understand that final nothingness in which, "are included all imaginable and unimaginable possibilities."[10] Most of Poe's tales, like "Usher," show his characters whirling in a cataract of destructive insight--an insight which is inexpressible in human terms. In the original unity of all things--the self-conscious artistic mind--lies the secondary cause of duality and separation. In Poe's theatre of characters, the secondary cause, the psychic split, to which his heroes unconsciously succumb, is hidden: it manifests itself in obsessional symbolic form, as for example, the catatonic state, an eye, a heart, a cat.

---

[9] Case, p. 7.

[10] Ibid.

In attempting to express this dark force, Poe confronts the fact of limited human terminology, and his symbolic solutions, his struggle with limitations and form make him an early kind of Symboliste and modern poetry. His is the thoroughly modern problem of finding flexible symbolic equations for hitherto unexplored facets of human experience.

A full understanding of the two related themes present in "The Fall of the House of Usher" leads to a comprehensive view of Poe's work, for these two ideas appear time and again with poetical consistency. Poe explores all the possible corridors of the labyrinth of the unconscious and at the end of all of them, one finds Fortunato's walls which lead only to claustrophobic death. Each of his tales could be said to be a sounding of the soul, an exploration of the various dead-end corridors of this labyrinth, so that seen in a critical light, Poe's work does appear as a systematic and consistent attempt to know <u>what</u> he is doing, and exactly <u>where</u> he is. He constantly expresses the desire to travel freely between the realms of life and death, dream and waking, consciousness and unconsciousness, and this desire is balanced by the fear that, at one end of the voyage in the labyrinth of the unconscious, there is only annihilation. His grotesques of human dismemberment, which are in many ways more horrific than his arabesques, provide, beneath their satirical sufface, an initial example.

"A Predicament," "Loss of Breath," and "The Man that Was Used Up" have a common core in the technique Poe employs in them to express his basic theme. In the first of these tales, a young lady, appropriately named Signora Psyche Zenobia, climbs to the top of a Gothic cathedral by means of a winding stair, because she is siezed by an uncontrollable desire to ascend the "giddy pinnacle." Although the tale unfolds in a ludicrous context, Poe is still manipulating his symbols with great care. The ascent to the pinnacle, Zenobia finds, as do

all mystics searching for enlightened consciousness, is arduous. Not only are the stairs difficult to climb, but to attain the point of vision--"the aperture"-- at the top of the pinnacle, she must rely on the help of her servant Pompey, a gnomish figure representing a magic intermediary akin to Blake's spectre, who, because he is essentially a neutral force, can be used ot abused.

Having attained this point of full consciousness in no lesser place than the seat of heaven on earth, Zenobia finds that the aperture she is looking through is really the dial face of a huge clock at the top of the cathedral, and the scythe of time--a brutally clear symbol--has imprisoned her head in this position. The clock-time of waking reality interrupts her moment of reverie and she finds that first, her eyes, then, her head, are thrown into the abyss of the gutter down below. She experiences a kind of "absurd" relief that time has beheaded her. What Poe is describing is the ludicrous aspect, an ironical side, of the sensation of vertigo. He seems to be experimenting here, with a technique which becomes the distinguishing feature of the literature which follows after him--especially in the work of Kafka and Dostoievski. Zenobia's case is an example of the "ridiculous" which keeps almost even pace with the tragic side of experience, in the same way that Ivan Karamazov is constantly haunted by his ridiculous side in Smerdyakov. The comic consciousness enters into a tragic situation and produces that quality of absurdity, so prevalent in contemporary fiction.

Dismembered in this absurd way, Zenobia is, however, not dead, and Poe uses her to give the theme of the "orderly derangement of the senses" actual material value.

> I will candidly confess that my feelings were now of the most singular--nay of the most mysterious, the most perplexing and incomprehensible character. My senses were here and there at one and the same moment. With my head I imagined, at one time, that I the head, was the real Signora Psyche Zenobia--at another I felt convinced that myself, the body was the proper identity. To clear my ideas on the topic I felt in my pocket for my snuff-box, but, upon getting it, and endeavouring to apply a pinch of its grateful contents in the ordinary manner,

> I became immediately aware of my peculiar deficiency, and threw the box at once down to my head. It took a pinch with great satisfaction, and smiled me an acknowledgment in return. Shortly afterward it made me a speech, which I could hear but indistinctly without ears. I gathered enough, however, to know that it was astonished at my wishing to remain alive under such circumstances.[11]

Dead, yet not dead, unconscious yet conscious, the Signora exemplifies one consistent thread of Poe's vision. She journeys to the height of waking consciousness only to hurl herself and her cerebral part, into the abyss of hallucination. And not before she has completed the voyage which grants her life in death, and consciousness, in what could only be a literally unconscious world, does Poe allow her to be destroyed, to breath, "I have done."

The theme of dismembering an individual to the point where he must, realistically, be dead and is yet wholly alive and rational occurs again in "Loss of Breath." The hero of this tale literally loses his breath and yet refuses to die. Significantly, the only apparent effect this loss of breath has on him, is that he cannot express himself--he cannot speak in his customary manner. In a series of hallucinative adventures, the hero is proclaimed dead by his coach-mates as he looks on, unable to speak, and is sold for an autopsy. Discovering some signs of animation in the corpse, once he has cut off its ears, the doctor calls for an apothecary who attributes the hero's kicking and plunging to the use of a Galvanic battery. Having finished with Mr. Lackobreath for one day, the surgeon stores him in his attic, where this invincible being has his face marred by hungry cats. He escapes only to be hung--a matter which affects him little since he already has no breath--and finally he ends in a public charnal house. The significance of living inhumation, even in this grotesque and ridiculous setting, and the hero's perfect waking lucidity in what is really a death state, again reveals Poe's preoccupation with the desire to remain in full possession of both consciousness and identity in a hallucinative dream world. There is a consistency, a self-reflection, in the comic tales, which gives

---

[11] Poe, p. 352.

this "unfunny" material a critical value--a sort of savage rage in which Poe gets caught up in his own grotesquerie. It is possible that Poe's sardonic distance is due to a self-disgust with his own inflexible materials, which are filled with the melodrama of "public symbolism" forced upon him by temporal circumstance--a "public symbolism" which is not sensitive enough for the expression of his vision.

The case of Brevet Brigadier-General John A.B.C. Smith in "The Man that Was Used Up" is filled with a similar savage grotesquerie. A hero of "the late Bugaboo and Kickapoo Campaign," Smith, as the narrator finally discovers, is merely a torso, an "odd-looking bundle." The rest of him--voice, eye, palate, hair, teeth, arms, and legs--is composed of the apparatus of modern technical ingenuity, which, once screwed on, make the complete being. In a schizophrenic world of disparity, Poe's dismembered heroes and heroines are emblematic not only of society as he sees it, but also suggest the author's interest in exploring the boundaries of human understanding. How far can man go before destruction overtakes him? What are the limits that human rationality and self-consciousness can attain with impunity? Can the demarcation line between life and death, between dream and reality, consciousness and unconsciousness, be done away with? Creation with Poe, becomes an exploration into some unknown realm in the face of a destructive power, which may strike at any moment, and man remains an indefinable question mark whose limits are obscured.

Arabesque counterparts to Poe's grotesques of dismemberment are his tales of mesmerism. Behind Poe's interest in mesmerism--a hypnotic feat which allows man to have control over another's mind--lies the more important dilemma of the limits of consciousness. In "Mesmeric Revelation," the narrator hypnotizes a man, just on the point of death, and while the patient is in this "sleep-waking" condition, he asks him a series of questions pertaining to the nature of the universe and the process of dying. The dialogue between the two men reveals the symbolic value mesmerism

has for Poe.

More than a mere scientific experiment popular at the time, mesmerism becomes, with Poe, another extension of his consistent vision. Just as the current paraphernalia of the fiction of the day--the tomb, the dying woman--take on deeper symbolic significance with Poe, so he endows the phenomenon of mesmerism with a suggestive effect all its own. The mesmerist, in full possession of his waking reason, encounters his subject, who is in an unconscious state and at the brink of death. Through his subject, the coolly aware mesmerist explores unknown regions without endangering his own sanity. Like the self-critical, fully-conscious artist, he voyages to the end of a dream, only to return, unchanged, from the depths. "Mesmeric Revelation" presents a cosmological vision which bears the germs of Eureka. And indeed, the"intuition" which Poe speaks of in this final prose poem, greatly resembles the relationship set up between the mesmerist and his subject. Intuition, for Poe, is a ladder with invisible steps. "It is but the conviction arising from those inductions or deductions of which the processes are so shadowy as to escape our consciousness, elude our reason, or defy our capacity of expression."[12]

The conscious mind, that is, the mesmerist, gazing into the depths, cannot quite comprehend the unconscious processes which lead to his subject's, his under-side's, discovery concerning the nature of the universe. Poe understands that if he could fully comprehend these unconscious processes, he would attain full knowledge; yet full knowledge is total suffering and ultimate annihilation. As André Malraux points out in his Temptation of the West, total awareness is death. Nevertheless, Poe wishes to travel as close to the brink as possible and re-emerge untouched. His position is that of the self-critical artist, who, like the mesmerist, desires to remain detached from the material which makes up the subject of his exploratory art--the material of the unconscious.

---

[12]Poe, Eureka, p.25.

"The Case of Mr. Valdemar" presents a set-up similar to that of "Mesmeric Revelation," although here Poe is working in a more fully exploited dramatic context. Furthermore, only the mesmeric process, the journey into the unknown, into death, is rendered here, without the other tale's traces of a cosmological vision. The mesmerist and M. Valdemar, his symbolical double, represent the possibility of travelling freely between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, and the border line between the two states is destroyed for a period of seven months, clock time.

But by far the most interesting of Poe's mesmerist creations is "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains," for it contains a curious and complex linking of the journey into death, into the unconscious and into dream, together with the process of return from these states. Here, Poe pushes into the unfathomed realm of memory, as he does in "The Raven," and "Ulalume," and explores the relationship between this seat of symbols and archetypes and the world of dream, death and the unconscious. The central figure in the narrative is Bedloe, a character who is described with the sum of Poe's suggestive subtlety.

There is something perplexing about Bedloe, the narrator finds. He seems young, yet "there were moments when I should have had little trouble in imagining him a hundred years of age."[13] Bedloe's appearance is altogether singular, particularly his eyes, which "were abnormally large and round like those of a cat. The pupils, too, upon any accession or diminution of light, underwent contraction or dilation, just such as is observed in the feline tribe."[14]

Apart from this piece of realistic observation concerning the eyes of drug-addicts, the insistence on the feline quality of Bedloe's eyes brings to mind several other important figures in Poe's fictional canvas--the black cat, killed by his master in an inebriated frenzy, and Ligeia, with her dark, feline grace. It is the fate of both these latter figures, perhaps in accordance with Egyptian mythology and the folk-proverb of the cat who has nine lives, to journey into the

[13] Poe, p. 679.
[14] Ibid.

land of the dead and return from thence with a minimum of change. Poe seems to want to suggest this in his intial description of Bedloe, and the suggestion os emphasized by his final comment on Bedloe's eyes: "yet their ordinary condition was so totally vapid, filmy and dull, as to convey the idea of the eyes of a long interred corpse."[15]

Mesmerist physician to this being, neither dead nor alive, is Templeton, "an old gentleman, perhaps seventy years of age," who has total control over Bedloe's mind. The stress placed on Templeton's age auggests that Poe wishes him to appear as a senex figure--a wise old man well-versed in extraordinary knowledge.

In the "strange interregnum of the seasons," the "time out of time" of Indian summer, Bedloe is the subject of a peculiar adventure. Walking in the Ragged Mountains, he enters a "gorge" whose "solitude seemed absolutely virgin" and he feels himself to be "the very first and sole adventurer who had ever penetrated its recesses."[16] The region is covered by a "thick and peculiar mist," the path he follows is "sinuous" and because of his drugged state, he suffers from that hyperacuteness of the senses which is so particular to Poe's heroes. The psychological landscape described here is in its implications identical to that of "Usher." The entry into a previously unpenetrated gorge, the "oppressive closeness of the atmosphere," the mist which hides the light of the day-light sun, the maze of the sinuous path--all are indications of a journey into an unconscious realm, into an intact "virgin" gorge. Bedloe hears the loud beating of a drum, and Poe ironically indicates that he "could not have been more surprised at the sound of the trump of the Archangel."[17] The reference is well-taken, for as the

---

[15]Poe, p. 679.

[16]Poe, p. 681.

[17]Poe, p. 682.

Tibetan Book of the Dead points out, the sound in the ear of a dead man is that of a drum.[18] But the dead man in the eastern cult is merely a being existing in a different state of consciousness and death for him is a period of played-back memory. Death, at this unconscious level, is indeed, "immemorial," that is, a kind of feed-back of the memory in which the individual ego dissolves into the "all" of memory, the oneness of all things. Death, then becomes a reverse birth, symbolized by the virgin birth in the isolated gorge. When Bedloe washes himself in a small spring of water, before his visionary recollections of what Poulet would term a "prenatal epoch" begin, he affirms this. In the collective unconscious which Poe is exploring here, the stream often contains the waters of remembrance and rebirth, the journey from the "other side" back into life.

Bedloe in recounting his adventure urgently denies that his experience was that of a state of dream. "What I saw--what I heard--what I felt--what I thought--had about it nothing of the unmistakeable idiosyncrasy of the dream. All was rigorously self-consistent."[19] Like all of the so-called hallucinative states which Poe describes, Bedloe's experience is more the symbolic manifestation of something akin to dream, than dream as the popular imagination intends it. Rather, the self-consistent nature of the state he describes suggests that through him Poe is exploring a further corridor of the labyrinth of the unconscious, while maintaining the logic and lucidity of waking reason.

What Bedloe discovers at the end of the corridor of the unconscious, is a prenatal mirror image of himself. He "lives" through the process of dying, which his mirror image undergoes, and maintains full self-consciousness throughout, only to find that he can return to the world of the living unchanged. The suggestive hints of Bedloe's agelessness, his feline eyes,

---

[18] W.Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., The Tibetan Book of the Dead (New York, 1960), p.129 n.

[19] Poe, p. 683.

fall into place. Bedloe has already lived and died in the figure of Oldeb, and having traced his last existence to its end through unconscious memory processes, he now possesses the secrets of birth and dying.

For Templeton, the initiator of this exploration into unknown psychical sides of exitence, as for Poe, Bedloe/Oldeb has fulfilled his destined purpose. These detached observers have been given the opportunity of viewing the possibilities of man's unconscious processes. Yet, for Bedloe, the end is at hand, for, having consciously experienced the realities of unconscious memory and its significance in the fact of birth and dying, his existence is replete with knowledge, and he can do naught but await destruction. He rejoins his double and fulfills the oneness which, for Poe, is equal to destruction. As a final piece of irony, he dies in a manner parallel to Oldeb. The poisonous black leech which kills Bedlo, as he is called in the obituary notice, has the same coloring, effect, and writhing snake-like motion, as the arrow which killed Oldeb. The death-rebirth-death cycle is complete, and Poe's hero has once more destroyed himself by allowing himself to become too fully entangled in man's unconscious processes.

In "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains," Poe clearly reveals that he is fascinated by the illusive wall that separates dream from reality. On the one hand, he is afraid that this wall may be a protective device which keeps man healthy, and if one pushes too far, one ends like Usher. On the other hand, however, the possibility arises that this wall can be torn down since it may only be the result of centuries of habit. Thus, in this particular tale, Templeton, the equivalent of the artist, is successful in holding memory itself incorruptible, by keeping Oldeb alive in Bedloe, and by having his subject move freely across the wall that separates dream from reality. Like the poet, he is incarnating his own experience, and although he may suffer from his participation in this

experience, he is not destroyed by it.

If the tales of mesmerism pursue one corridor of Poe's labyrinth of the unconscious, then his arabesques of madness and obsession are explorations in another direction. While the first allow a return from the maze, at least for one figure--the mesmerist who manipulates the strings of discovery--these latter tales pursue corridors from which all exit into waking reality is denied. Two tales will provide an example.

In "Berenice," Poe describes the outcome of an idée fixe in a hero who is capable of watching the progress of his monomania with all the clarity of lucid reason, yet is totally devoid of the ability which would allow him to arrest its destructive progress. In the Usher tradition, the hero of "Berenice," is a further example of what were to become "decadent" creations. Narrator of his own experience, Egaeus, as the hero calls himself, unfolds not only his tale, but also the full range of his madness, through the inadvertant self-confession technique, which Poe so often employs.

Son of a time-honored race of visionaries, the hero is quick to set the tone of his own existence: "Misery is manifold. The wretchedness of the earth is multiform," he states in his opening lines, suggesting no only what is to follow in the tale, but, furthermore, the degenerate depths of decay which are the birthplace of Poe's vision of man and his predicament. Like Poe's other decadent heroes, Egaeus suffers from a sentiment du déjà vu, which convinces him of the souls' continuity, of the fact that man is not limited by the tangible waking realities of birth and death.

> But it is mere idleness to say that I had not lived before--that the soul has no previous existence. ...Convinced myself, I seek not to convince. There is however, a remembrance of aerial forms--of spiritual and meaning eyes--of sounds, musical yet sad; a remembrance which will not be excluded; a memory like a shadow--vague, variable, indefinite, unsteady; and like a shadow, too, in the impossibility of my getting rid of it while the sunlight of my reason shall exist.[20]

[20] Poe, p. 642.

Egaeus' sensation is not akin to Wordsworth's "intimations of immortality" which result in jubilation due to the revelation that man is in possession of an immortal soul. Poe's idea isn't naively idealist; rather, it is the horror of being continuously haunted by a pre-existence never to be logically apprehended. It is horrible to be"immortal" in this sense, horrible because a continuity of suffering is implied. An intimation of this sort is not a cause for joy, but results, rather, in a desperate quest for the sources of that memory, of that existence, which waking consciousness cannot quite grasp, and whose roots, Poe feels, lie in the cesspool of psychic experience. Poe, like Egaeus, is tormented not so much by a pre-conscious state, as a state which was fully conscious in its own incomprehensible way. "Je est un autre." While I am here in the present, I am also someone else in some other time sphere. Egaeus' sentiment du déjà vu exists as a fact only on the level of an influential and recurrent anxiety dream which daylight tends to dissipate, but which nags the waking consciousness continually. The human predicament is haunted by "dream-facts" and if any such thing as metempsychosis exists, it can only be a torment for a mind which is not essentially Buddhistic and finds the business of merging into ultimate oneness, by way of losing total individual identity, an extremely difficult process.

Egaeus' world, from his earliest boyhood, is haunted by dreams and hallucinations. As he matures, this imaginative existence is intensified until it blocks out all else. "The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams, became, in turn, not the material of my everyday existence, but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself."[21] For Egaeus, and in this he differs greatly from the Romantic, it is not the stuff of dreams, but the dreams themselves, which have become an occult vocabulary.

As Egaeus gradually loses complete hold on the world of

---

[21]Poe, p.643.

waking reality, so Berenice, his cousin, who plays a role similar to Madeline's and who is like the majority of Poe's ethereal women merely a psychic emanation of the hero, falls totally into the grips of a fatal disease. This disease is a peculiar one and links her tightly to the narrator, who similarly admits that he is suffering from a particular "disease." "And even while I gazed upon her, the spirit of change swept over her, pervading her mind, her habits, and her character, and in a manner the most subtle and terrible, disturbing even the identity of her person."[22]

Soul to Egaeus, her identity, along with her moral conduct, is completely changed as he loses his grip on reality and falls into the bog of degeneracy. The trances which Berenice is subject to are equivalent symbols for the entire life-processes of her cousin, as he falls victim to his quest in the labyrinth of the unconscious. Egaeus likes nothing better than to become absorbed for the better part of the day in a quaint shadow falling aslant upon the tapestry or upon the floor, because his existence is composed of the search after shadows, of which Berenice is only a manifestation. To lie lost in a trance of nothingness is his greatest comfort--"to repeat monotonously, some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to convey any ideas whatever to the mind; to lose all sense of motion or physical existence, by means of absolute bodily quiescence long and obstinately persevered in."[23] It is interesting to note that one aspect of the trance which Egaeus describes is really the test-pattern of the Symboliste poet, as he transforms common into the sounds of something more purely poetical. This is what Mallarmé would call "donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu."

Egaeus points out that for him to indulge in these trances is not to be caught in a common reverie from which a kind of

---

[22]Poe, p.643.

[23]Poe, p.644.

revelation may arise. Rather, the trance is a painful process, which results in the material exaggeration of the objects on which his mind fixes itself. What Egaeus is actually practicing is the "systematic derangement of the senses" and he will take this to the point of no return. Since his derangement is a sensual one, it is fitting that at the bottom of his journey into the depths of dream, there is always a very material fact, and this is, of course, the basis of Poe's vision. Hence, it is the physical degeneration of Berenice which fascinates him and gains preponderence over all other elements.

Whereas Berenice had existed merely as an abstraction, a vision, before, in his present state, she becomes an acute reality. The soul, the psyche, has no meaning to Poe before it touches the bedrock of human existence in all its material ugliness. Thus, it is only now that Egaeus decides to wed his cousin. Like Kurtz's soul, his has gone mad, and rather than struggling against its madness, he decides to join it and pursue this final dream to its logical conclusion. A oneness results, a union of lucid delirium and chaotic unconsciousness--a union which can only lead to total annihilation. Egaeus pursues his sinuous path in the labyrinth and similarly meets a monster--the monster of his mad soul, obsessed with an <u>idée fixe</u> symbolic of Poe's entire materialistic view of the quagmire of human unconsciousness. His wife journeys into the symbolic crypt, a further step into the madness of their dream, and he joins her there to remove her teeth, the object of his monomania. The sheerly material value of the object of his monomania contradicts the aesthetic mood of the tale, but with Poe, one can never excape the horror of the isolated existential fact, and in this context it attains overwhelming proportions. It is like imagining a Holderlin or Keats yanking teeth , and turning into a Dorian Gray at the very worst moment of his decadence--a self-critical romanticism or irony.

Since Egaeus returns from the crypt, so must Berenice, for the mad soul cannot be fully destroyed before its possessor

suffers a similar fate. Poe does not present the outcome of their adventure in the kind of annihilation scene which ensues upon Usher's madness, for, since there is no narrator in this tale, it is a "one way" dream. The point made, however, is much the same. A destruction scene is unnecessary for Egaeus, for he has delved into the world of the unconscious and of death to a point where he can never escape from the labyrinth of the human mind. His journey has brought him to the no-exit world of total madness.

Within this context "The Black Cat," is interesting because it defines in a less philosophical manner, the monster who dwells in the abyss of Poe's labyrinth of the unconscious. In concrete and highly dramatic terms "The Black Cat," like its counterparts, "The Imp of the Perverse," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Man of the Crowd," presents the raw materialism which forms the bedrock of Poe's vision and his fear that if man explores the depths of his being to its most obscure point, he will only find the pitch blackness which is totally destructive of all waking reason.

The hero and narrator of "The Black Cat" is a far more ordinary being than the neurasthenic decadents of "Berenice" and "Usher." And precisely because he is the epitome of middle class normality, exceptional only in "docility, humanity and tenderness of heart," the depths to which he sinks make a greater impact on the reader's mind. No longer isolated in some hereditary castle, the hero of "The Black Cat" takes to wife a woman ordinary in her kindliness and superstitions, who has more earthly reality than the psyche-figures of Madeline and Berenice. His disease is not the neurasthenic one which can only afflict gentleman dandies, but the much cruder one of alcoholism. Yet the results are much the same, for alcoholism is, after all, merely a public symbol behind which Poe disguises the more basic problem of vertigo.

The figure of the black cat, for which the narrator develops a hatred which he can only explain is due to the spirit of perverseeeess--that quality which causes men to

act irrationally in defiance of all waking reason--takes on the same value as the figures of Madeline and Berenice have in relation to Usher and Egaeus. Murdered and reborn, he becomes the symbol of the narrator's soul moving to the depths of madness, as he is caught in a dream of his own contrivance. No matter how often the narrator stresses the fact that this cat is a mere "brute beast," he emerges as the material embodiment of the depths to which "man fashioned in the image of the High God" can descend. Tortured into meaningful and revelatory existence by his master, he becomes the image of his brutality, his guilt, and finally, his self-destruction. For man, in search of a sign in the depths of self which will allow him to believe in a vaster reality, finds only the revelation of brute bestiality. To ascend and descend, for Poe, are one and the same, and the descent into the abyss, into the "cellar" of the narrator's house and being, reveals only horror and a murder which is in itself suicidal. The wall behind which the narrator has buried his wife and, accidently, the psychic "cat" is the wall which separates dream from reality, death from life, for as Poe points out in "Monos and Una" only "by sleep and its wold alone is Death imaged." It has been built out of fear, the habit of fear, which man build up to protedt himself from the unknown, and death, that extension of dream, is the ultimate inconnu which "brings terror to all hearts." The narrator, however, is haunted by voices on the other side of this wall, and death becomes a reality, which like dream, shapes life. Thus, the narrator is led to confess, haunted by his own irrational and unconscious powers, and this confession is essentially a plea for self-annihilation. Man caught in the web of his own creation cries with the "sobbing voice of a child" and consigns himself to the hangman. The concrete reality of the unconscious world of imagination and dream becomes the actuality of the charnal house.

Entangled in their own destructive forces, Poe's heroes can never ask for forgiveness as Faustus or any Dostoievskian

hero may. In Poe's world there is no possibility of making this choice, for his characters live in a socially normative realm, where any outside God is devoid of power. Hence, they cannot make a plea for redemption once they have stepped out of social and fully conscious bounds--outside "conscience," itself. They are left only with the brute fact of the charnal house, the logical conclusion of their self-destructive and irrational existence.

At the end of the majority of the corridors of the labyrinth, there is only the ugliness and destructive powers of the monster, who is man faced with the existential fact of himself--the fact that he is only what his dreams have made him, and what death, the ultimate consummation, has made of him through habits of fear. Poe's analysis of the human condition touches on the cerebral and cognitive aspects of mind and feeling. The beast in the labyrinth is man confronted by the inescapable depths of his own abyss, the man of the crowd ho woams in the labyrinth of the city of life-in-death or death-in-life, and whose face mirrors the totality of experience--"of vast mental power, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense--of supreme despair"--the "pictural incarnation of the fiend."[24]

This last quality of despair, as modernity will signal, is the supreme symbol, the state which fuses mental and emotional problems. If Poe is not the first to single out this despair, he is the first to associate it with the question of nerve and the failure of nerve--the first to say, "how far can man go on his voyages of inner exploration.

---

[24]Poe,"The Man of the Crowd," p. 478.

THE CENTRE WHICH CANNOT HOLD

At the very hear of Poe's vision, two counter-forces are at work, which provide a centre around which his fiction can be patterned. The first force is a centrifugal one. Its hub lies in the world of waking reality. As this force moves rapidly away from the centre, all things fly apart and man is caught in a power which "decomposes." Having lost hold of the one stable point, the centre, man's fate is entangled in this swirling centrifugal force and he becomes the inevitable victim of a mental, moral or physical dismemberment, like the heroes or heroines of "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Berenice," "A Predicament," and "The Black Cat." His world is a sphere of decay and degeneration where a single unchanging identity is a thing of the past.

The second force which is at work in Poe's fictional world is a centripetal one. This is the power which brings all things towards a single unifying centre. It reduces the world of disparity, of separation, into a simple oneness--the oneness which Dupin reaches through deduction, and which Poe describes, through the powers of intuition, in Eureka and in his dialogues. It is the world of the coolly detached mesmerist rather than the decomposing sphere of his subject. It is an enclave of anti-entropic forces which hold decay static for a moment of insight, of poetic cohesion, though the subject is inevitably doomed.

Like Yeats' gyres, however, these twin forces intersect one another, so that as one force tends towards its ultimate (inner or outer) perimeter, a moment of "reversal" arises and one finds oneself suddenly switched to the other force, and moving now in the opposite direction; a sort of rail-way switch is at work. At the point of total decomposition, the subject of "Mesmeric Revelation" sees the contrary vision of oneness and unity; while the destruction of all "accidents" and purification of contingencies which reduce the manifold world to oneness in Eureka really signify the end of the world as we know it--a total annihilation of all that is recognizable

to man. At either extreme of the centripetal or centrifugal movements, there is an "apocalypse"--a complimentary image, as if two mirrors were held face to face.

The various "apocalypses" which Poe describes are worthy of attention, for they provide a second central core to an understanding of his vision. Far removed from the traditional conception of a grand consummation, Poe's apocalypses are not those moments of ultimate revelation in which man has always believed, but has never as yet fully seen. Nor is it that moment of fulfillment for the self-righteous Christian who sees in the Apocalypse, a confirmation of what he has always believed to be true and just. Rather Poe's apocalypse, in its various manifestation, is something which must come as a final solution to the existence of each of his central heroes. His heroes unconsciously, in fact anxiously, apprehend this final solution; they suffer from their intuition of this constant force which can enter the world of man at any time. They intuit that the form it must take will always be the form of the "unexpected"--that which escapes the outline human expression can give. Hence, they are in a state of constant and secret apprehension about the arrival of this unnameable novelty, this <u>inconnu</u>. This is the existential base of Poe's fiction. The human situation, as he sees it, is such that man must live constantly in fear of the arrival of the unexpected, of which the ultimate existential form is the <u>fact</u> of death--that death which brings "terror" to all hearts. The human condition is, for Poe, a state of anxiety. Thus, it becomes clear why he uses the device of the horror tale as a vehicle for expressing his vision. If fear, or rather horror--and horror is an expectation rather than a confirmation--is the fundamental common point in man's experience of life, than the horror tale acts as an epiphany of man's <u>angst</u>--his continual state of apprehension, of anxiety, as he awaits that which he does not "know" and can intuit only insofar as he knows that it <u>must</u> come.

Usher provides an extreme, but clear, example of man caught in this dilemma, awaiting an ultimate solution which he knows must come, but about which he can do nothing except feel anxiety.

> To an anomalous species of terror I found him a bounden slave. "I shall perish," said he, "I must perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of the soul. I have indeed no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect--in terror. In this unnerved, in this pitiable condition I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR."[1]

Usher is a man literally frightened to death by the expectation of some ultimate fear. This fear may or may not produce hallucination, but it does produce death, just as a hysterical cancer can result in death. Although Usher's case is extreme, he is , in essence, merely another symbol of man's state of angst as he awaits the unexpected and unknowable.

It is interesting to note that Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle points out that the traumatic experience seems to rest chiefly upon the factor of surprise, of fright," The psyche placed into an extreme situation, however, will attempt to prepare itself for this all-encompassing fright by working it out in anxiety dreams, so that anxiety emerges as "a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, though it may be an unknown one." While "fright emphasizes the factor of surprise...there is something about anxiety that protects its subject against fright and so against fright-neuroses."[2]

If this is applied to Poe, it becomes apparent that his tales, in themselves, function as anxiety dreams, in which the characters live out the anxieties and frights of society,

---

[1]Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," p.235.

[2]Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (New York, 1959), pp. 28-30.

and act as a kind of therapy for that "sickness" within the "public symbolism." (Again one thinks of Mallarmé's dictum about Poe--"Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu.") The horror tale, acting as a symbol of man's angst, also provides a therapeutic cure for anxiety as it prepares man for that ultimate existential apocalypse of death.

Within Poe's fictional canvas, however, this apocalypse is really a series of anti-climactic strokes which come after the moment of terror. Unlike the Christian one, this "apocalypse" has an existence which is peculiarly its own and which is totally oblivious of human destiny, since it has its own being. There is something strictly inhuman about the "solution" it offers to the human predicament, for in fact, it is a "dissolution." Unlike Poe's apocalypse, the Christian Apocalypse and its dread are predictable. Religious dread intiates a self-dedication to a formalized series of "ritual deeds" which guarantees a safe-conduct through the "jaws of hell." For Poe, a dedicated series of acts, ritualized or not, do not serve as a preparative, because there is no certainty as to where and in what they will end. As opposed to the Christian belief, there is no one-to-one relationship between the dedicated act and its consequence, for Poe's apocalypse contains nothing of the humanly recognizable. It always takes the form of the totally unexpected and it comes upon the existence which has been anxiously awaiting it without demonstrating the least awareness of that existence, and yet, wholly overwhelming it. The feeling one derives from Poe's apocalypse is that, no matter how far man stretches his waking reason, even if it is to the breaking point, he can only give a half-expression of the quality of this apocalypse, for, as Una says, "Only in death can man define the indefinable."

Thus, this novel thing, this "newness," comes into the world of man and destroys, while not acknowledging that very existence which alone can comprehend any novelty at all. The force of Poe's apocalypse is that it comes as that final thing

which man can feel horror about, without ever comprehending. It entirely disregards man's existence while destroying it, yet it cannot be theologically explained, nor pacified into a social framework of knowledge. Strictly speaking, Poe is saying it has no symbolic equivalent--except the single individual's "uneasiness." Hence, the single individual's death becomes a symbol of a larger, overwhelming demolition. In Poe's world this inexplicable happening cannot be called God, and his apocalyptic vision sees something far more terrible than the Christian godly apocalypse, for it allows no redemption and no revelation of itself.

The "MS Found in a Bottle" clearly renders the main outlines of Poe's apocalyptic vision, as it depicts the twin convergence of one, a rational existence, and secondly, a completely mystical and terrible destiny. The initial salvage of the narrator from the grips of a giant storm is immediately apprehendable as a symbol of this "meeting" with an apocalyptic event, and of the wreck of the single rational mind afloat on strange seas. Cast upon the sea of destiny, the narrator finds himself in a mysterious <u>bateau ivre</u> which journeys into a realm where all rational touchstones seem to disappear. On this chaotic sea of the unconscious, located appropriately in the South (away from the northern, reasonable realm of Urizen), the sun seems to resemble its opposite, the moon as it rises with "a sickly yellow lustre--emitting no decisive light," and gives off only a "dull and sullen glow without reflection as if all its rays were polarized." "It was a dim, silver-like rim, alone, as it rushed down the unfathomable ocean."[3]

Awaiting the sixth day of his travels, the narrator finds that daylight is never to come again: "We were enshrouded in a pitchy blackness. Eternal night continued to envelop us."[4]

---

[3]Poe, "MS Found in a Bottle," p.120.

[44]Ibid.

He is far from the sphere of waking reason, far from the world of clock time, as he travels deeper into the realm of the unconsciousness, where vertigo is the operative norm of existence. "At times we gasped for breath at an elevation beyond the albatross--at times became dizzy with the velocity of our descent into some watery hell."[5] Through these details of "atmosphere," Poe builds up the question implicit in all his tails, and which, is the sum of their horror--'What could possibly happen next?'

At last, in answer to it, a huge ship hurls itself, like the storm did earlier, upon the narrator and swallows him up. His first reaction is to hide from its crew, "a race of people who had offered, to the cursory glance I had taken, so many points of vague novelty, doubt and apprehension."[6] Yet, there is no need to hide, for the crew of old men, these ancient mariners of mystic wisdom, are completely oblivious of his existence. His apprehension, his dread as he journeyed in anticipation through the regions of the uncharted south of the unconscious, has been in vain, for although a "new sense--a new entity" has been added to his soul, which he cannot comprehend because its origins are so novel, the inhabitants of the ship pass him by quite unnoticed. "Concealment is utter folly on my part for the people <u>will not</u> see."[7] The very thing which must happen to man and which he intuits, yet dreads, completely overlooks his presence.

Incomprehensible to him, this ship which he names <u>Discovery</u>, yet endows him with a sentiment of <u>déjà vu</u>, a sense of prenatal memories existing in a time, out of time: "There will occasionally flash across my mind a sensation of familiar things, and there is always mixed up with such indistinct shadows of recollection, an unaccountable memory of old foreign chronicles

---

[5]Poe, p. 121.

[6]Poe, p. 122.

[7]Poe, p. 123.

and ages long ago."[8] Poe is well aware that what appears as novel to man is psychically old. What happened to the narrator is that a rationality, defined at first, by his own solitary skiff, has converged with a "rationality" of a different order, which is in a sense a mirror-image many times magnified in aize and psychic knowledge, of himself and his own quest. Psychic knowledge is old, familiar, always the same, because man's attempt to express the vision of his anxiety has always been the same, a recurrent statement of the same half-seen problem.

The larger ship is like the narrator's skiff, trying to make its way "home," trying to seek out the source of its own dream, but it has its own language of "discovery," which is incomprehensible to the narrator. No matter how wondrous seems its knowledge, however, it too, cannot escape from the destined whirlpool, for like the smaller ship and the narrator himself, it is too small for the source of things, the final apocalypse.

An early tale, the"MS" presents Poe's situation and his vision of la condition humaine vis-à-vis the cosmos in a relatively undisguised way. The narrator exclaims, and this might well be a spiritual autobiography on Poe's part :

> To conceive the horror of my sensations is, I presume, utterly impossible; yet a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions predominates even over my despair, and will reconcile me to the most hideous aspect of death. It is evident that we are hurrying onward to some exciting knowledge--some never to be imparted secret whose attainment is destruction.[9]

Anxiety, a desire to penetrate the bowels of existence, and the certain knowledge that the quest can only end in total destruction--these are the key-notes of Poe's vision. And the narrator of the "MS," as he approaches the point of exciting knowledge, also approaches that apocalypse which will allow him to attain the knowledge he desires, only in the face of annihilation. On a basic literal level, Poe's vision stems from a hard bedrock of existential fact: simply that, no matter how hard one tries to get "in advance of death," it does not deter the ultimate collision. Furthermore, expression

[8] Poe, p. 123.
[9] Poe, p. 125.

cannot define what state of "being" death is, for outside the death state, it seems it can never be explained. Poe's "apocalypses" act not as final solutions for the reader but as magical spurs to the imagination. There is a feeling about his work that suggests if death could be expressed, it might be possible to deflect that final collision.

The apocalypse comes, in this particular tale, in the shape of a whirlpool. The narrator has travelled away from the material and rational, impelled by a centrifugal force, and now there is a switch to a centripetal power, which must ultimately destroy him in his journey toward oneness. It is interesting that Poe adds in his note to the "MS" that at the end of this whirlpool of extinction lie the bowels of the earth, and the pole is represented by a "black rock," the dark centre of existence, the inverted phallus, or, the dark side of the sun. This is the creative force which is not life-giving, but death-giving, just as Poe's women give birth to death. It is the "rock of silence and desolation" which signals the isolation of man's existence, and finally, it is the region wherein lie the roots of Poe's vision of man's chaotic unconscious.

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, Poe's only work which extends beyond the length of a tale, is central to an explication of this special apocalyptic vision. Implicit in this early work are all the themes which make up the core of Poe's vision. Pym's extensive travels, studied carefully, appear as an objective correlative for man's entire existence--an existence which is composed of the horror and anxiety which man experiences as he lives in continual premonition of an apocalypse which must come in some unexpected and indefinable form. Poe "thematically" structures this narrative in such a way that it suggests, even as a form, the substance of his vision. Pym has really no formal beginning, middle or end, and the totality of the significance of the tale can actually be

found in any one adventure or image, while the whole could go on interminably. Terror is piled upon terror, anxiety upon anxiety, so that at each moment Pym and the reader feel they are about to experience the ultimate confrontation with death, with the apocalypse. Yet, each time, the moment of final consummation is delayed so that when the abrupt close arrives in symbolic dress, it comes almost as an anti-climax. Pym has been so well prepared by his series of minor apocalypses that this fianl one provides no harbour, no death, but only the termination of all possible expression. The brusqueness of the ending of Pym, seen in historical perspective, is altogether revolutionary. It fails to wrap things up neatly, yet, like many later works, its symbolic significance provides a fitting closing point, for it confronts the reader with a mist of suggestiveness. The apocalypse must remain unpredictable and indefinable, but the horror of a state of continual expectation is a concrete reality.

The initial Ariel episode of Pym contains in abbreviated and symbolical form the substance of the whole. Arthur Gordon Pym, as the rhythm of his name and his origins in Edgartown suggest, is, of course, a projection of Poe himself, and it becomes increasingly apparent at the climax of the narrative, how this is intrinsically a tale probing the dilemmas of artistic expression and experience, as well as an exploration of man's existential situation. Augustus functions as Pym's double, although there is no clear demarcation line between the two, as there is between William Wilson and his shadowy super-ego. Pym, himself, admits, "It is probable, indeed, that our intimate communion had resulted in a partial interchange of character."[10]

The entire Ariel episode has the special air of a hallucinative nightmare, and this sets the tone for the remainder of the narrative. The youths awake in the

---

[10]Poe, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, p. 757.

middle of the night and embark on the wildest of adventures, only to return,unchanged, to all external eyes in the early morning. Augustus, in this instance, takes on the role of the mad double, the initiator of the exploration into irrational realms. His intoxication, however--as is always the case with Poe--takes onea symbolic value, suggesting that man is quite capable of such experience without external intrusion of any artificial kind. Pym strengthens this implication when he points out that Augustus' intoxication is "a state which, like madness, frequently enables the victim to imitate the outward demeanour of one in perfect possession of his senses."[11]--an idea which recurs often in Poe, especially in "The Black Cat," and "The Tell-Tale Heart." As Pym follows his mad double aboard the bateau ivre (a double irony in this context), he, too, leaves the rational realms of reason and is similarly subject to the hallucinative adventures of the dream world.

Pym'ssfirst sensations as he enters the topsy-turvy storm-world are those of dread. As he recognizes Augustus' agitation, and finally his total insensibility, he is possessed by an "extremity of ...terror" which leaves him "utterly benumbed" and almost "unconscious of sensation." As soon as he becomes partially accustomed to this first species of terror and resolves himself to await his destiny with fortitude, Poe subjects him to a new horror which appears to be that ultimate consummation which he has been awaiting.

> Hardly had I come to this resolution, when, suddenly, a loud and long scream or yell, as if from the throats of a thousand demons, seemed to pervade the whole atmosphere around and above the boat. Never while I live shall I forget the intense agony of terror I experienced at that moment. My hair stood erect on my head--I felt the blood congealing in my veins--my heart ceased utterly to beat, and without having once raised my eyes to learn the source of my alarm, I tumbled headlong and insensible upon the body of my fallen companion."[12]

---

[11]Poe, p. 752.

[12]Poe, p. 753.

Such is the human predicament that, that very thing which Pym had resolved himself to await calmly, comes upon him totally unexpectedly--as a sign of that final confrontation which man can only intuit. And even though Pym's horror and fall is tantamount to that experienced upon dying ("Life seemed to be totally extinct."), he is fated to return from this state, approximating death, many times. The apocalypse may manifest itself in signs such as this, but the sign is not the final reality, for it is explicable in human terms. Going up the hierarchy of minor apocalypses, Pym is always walking out of death, and is in a sense continually reborn. This time, as Pym awakes, he is capable of understanding what has happened to him, and he can explain it in concrete and directly communicable terms. However, factual deduction will eventually strike a limit. Each of Pym's rebirths, at first, are followed by an apprehendable explanation of what has happened at the moment of extreme anxiety. But, eventually, this dynamic simplification in deductive terms tends to lose its possibility of explication, since finally both the happening and the explanation are totally beyond belief. The proposed explanation becomes as strange and stranger, than the event itself. What Poe is doing, especially in the final portions of the narrative, is blowing up the deductive limits themselves, by showing that certain realms can only be comprehended by the powers of the imagination, and can only be rendered by a particular imaginative technique of <u>suggestion</u>.

Augustus' adventures parallel Pym's. He, too, has been in a state near death, has experienced "terror and despair" and has been regenerated from a death state. Moreover, in Augustus' case, there is that feeling of vertigo which seems to always accompany the sinking into a whirlpool of apocalyptic unconsciousness, for Poe. This "whirling round and round with inconceivable rapidity" to the centre, to the bowels of existence , is a direct reference to the realities of the "Maelstrom," the "MS" and certain aspects of the

final consummation of Pym, itself.

Another symbolic detail in the Ariel episode parallels an event that is to take place somewhat later in Pym's adventures. Pym is found by the whaling vessel in a most curious position. His body "as seen to be affixed in the most singular manner to the bottom of the Penguin." The bottom of the boat suggests the bottom of the world--the south pole, the area of unconscious revelation and apocalypse, not only for Poe, but for all artists exploring the sphere of the great memory-store. Notably, just before Pym is found by the Jane Guy, the bottom of the boat on which he is stranded, the Grampus, has turned upwards, so that he and Dirk Peters are really affixed to its nether side, the keel..The implication here, is of course, that the world has turned upside down, bu the down side, l'inconnu, now becomes the new sphere of adventure, the southern regions to which the Jane Guy will lead the two men, the area where unconscious imaginative experience predominates.. Within the Ariel episode, this motion downwards is seen in miniature, yet it is significant that Pym is rescued from this perilous situation underneath the Penguin (again, a bird he is to meet in southern areas), for later, too, he will escape from the savages of the "south."

The second stage of Pym's adventures presents a new set of anxieties, some dream-like premonitions of the apocalypse, and a series of signs which reveal something of the shape and nature this final consummation will take. It is interesting to learn, at the outset of this section, that Pym's imaginings, which he takes to be prophetic glimpses of his own destiny, are always "of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorror and tears upon some desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown."[13] In this Pym echoes what seem to be Poe's own feelings. Like Pym, Poe senses that the most suggestively powerful aspects of man's experience are those which border on suffering and despair, for it is only through

---

[13]Poe, p. 757.

the experience of "the rock of desolation" and the imaginative apprehension of death, that man is brought into contact with the remote, the "unapproachable and unknown," the world of chaotic dream within him, and the intuition of some horrific apocalypse from the external world. The ugliness of the hidden side of man, is for Poe, the bedrock of human imaginative experience, and Pym, in his travels, will live through all which archetypally represents the lowest depths to which man can sink, not because he is depraved, but because he is a victim.

Appropriately, Poe has Pym set sail upon the sea of life and death aboard the brig "Grampus"--"an old hulk and scarcely sea-worthy." Young though he may be, Pym's adventures are associated with decay and man's degeneracy. In its very name the Grampus suggests this decaying process, and furthermore, like the boat of the mystical and ancient mariners in the "MS?" it also holds the keys to archetypal and unconscious discovery. The two, it becomes evident, are closely linked in Poe's mind. Yet it is Pym's grandfather who puts up the greatest arguement against the youth' s going to sea. On the surface, this would seem to be a direct contradiction of the symbolic value attributed to the Grampus and its age. Looking more closely, however, it becomes apparent that Poe is aware of the dual nature of all symbols and is quite deliberately using the symbol of age in its two possible manifestations. The ancient mariner, voyaging on the element of eternal and turbulent flux, may be a key to discovery, but the old man, fixed to the stable land, suggests the caution of the establishment. And Pym, practicing that deception, which Davidson sees as the central motif of the narrative, dupes the old man of"the land" in view of setting sail on a more hazardous element in a brig which turns out to be another of Poe's <u>bateaux ivres</u>.

Pym's place, once he has boarded the Grampus, is logically enough, in the lowest reaches of the ship, the hold. His sleeping place is an"iron-bound box" which resembles nothing so much as a coffin. The youth's visions of coming

to grips with the depths of human experience are well under way. Not only is he aboard a decaying vessel bound for a voyage on perilous seas, but he is also alone, in the depths of that vessel, isolated in the innermost reaches of man's secret existence, far from the light of daytime reason.

While Pym remains in the hold, symbolically experiencing the nightmare of his won unconscious life, his alter-ego, Augustus, functions on the upper deck, and lives through the external manifestations of man's madness. The two are closely linked and complement each other. In fact, it is almost as if the massacre which takes place on the upper-deck were a direct effect of Pym's dreaming in the hold, out of sight, and, as he says at the close of this adventure, "I had great difficulty in bringing to recollection the various circumstances connected with my situation, and for some time remained firmly convinced that I was still in the hold of the brig, near the box, and that the body of Parker was that of Tiger."[14] In the hold, or above, whether man looks inwards or outwards, life is equally ugly and horrific.

Poe lays out the psychological landscape of the hold with telling detail. Like Montresor's underground vaults, William Wilson's early school house, and Usher's crumbling mansion, the hold is a confusing labyrinth with innumerable dark corridors--the complex maze of man's unconscious existence:

> The taper gave out so feeble a ray that it was with the greatest difficulty I could grope my way through the confused mass of lumber among which I now found myself. By degrees, however, my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and I proceeded with less trouble, holding on to the skirts of my friend's coat. He brought me, at length, after creeping and winding through innumerable passages, to an iron-bound box."[15]

At the centre of the gloomy labyrinth is the hard "fact" of the coffin, which will provide a further extension for Pym's exploration of unconscious realms, as he becomes the victim of a symbolic and premature burial. Althoggh Augustus, here

---

[14]Poe, p. 804.

[15]Poe, p.768.

Pym's conscious side and his link with the upper world, has provided him with a Daedelian cord so that he can find his way out of the maze, Pym, as he enters further into the reaches of dream, loses hold of this only possible mean to exit.

Initially Pym settles himself in for what he believes will be a comfortable stay in the hold of the ship, but experiences of a different order are in store for him. Falling asleep, he finds upon awakening that he has lost all sense of clock-time, and as modern psychology has shown, one of the easiest waysoof inducing lab-conditioned insanity is by depriving the subject of the means of calculating time. The way in which Poe describes this initial waking is similar to his depiction of the cataleptic's manner of coming out of a trance state. "Upon awaking, I felt strangely confused in mind, and some time elapsed before I could bring to recollection all the various circumstances of my situation. By degrees, however, I remembered all."[16] In "The Premature Burial," the narrator describes his waking from the cataleptic state in similar terms, and he remarks how his powers of memory take an exceptionally long time in returning.

Catalepsy is, for Poe, a trance akin to death and a premonition of the death state, the farthest reaches of sleep and dream, and from this state of total unconsciousness, the return to consciousness is always remarkably slow. Pym's sleep in the hold is no different from this. It, too, is a kind of trance, a trance in which he experiences living inhumation, the abyss of the dream world, notably in his coffin-like box, buried deep in the recesses of the ship among the badly stored materials which make the brig literally a bateau ivre. Tellingly, when Pym awakes, he has his first taste of anxiety. "The circumstances occasioned me great disquietude," and as he recognizes that he is literally

---

[16]Poe, p. 762.

buried in the hold, far from the possibility of outside help, his tension mounts to a new pitch.

Pym's second trance-like sleep is an even deeper sleep of the unconscious, wherein Poe describes a return to a primordial world peopled with ferocious creatures.

> My dreams were of the most terrific description. Every species of calamity and horror befell me. Among other miseries I was smothered to death between huge pillows, by demons of the most ghastly and ferocious aspect. Immense serpents held me in their embrace, and looked earnestly in my face with their fearfully shining eyes. Then deserts, limitless, and of the most forlorn and awe-inspiring character, spread themselves out before me. Immensely tall trunks of trees, gray and leafless, rose up in endless succession as far as the eye could reach. Their roots were concealed in wide-spreading morasses, whose dreary water lay intensely black, still, and altogether terrible, beneath. ...The scene changed; and I stood, naked and alone, amid the burning sandplains of Zahara. At my feet lay crouched a fierce lion of the tropics. Suddenly his wild eyes opened and fell upon me. With a convulsive bound he sprang to his feet, and laid bare his horrible teeth. In another instant there burst from his red throat a roar like the thunder of the firmament, and I fell impetuously to the earth. Stifling in a paroxysm of terror, I at last found myself partially awake. My dream, then, was not all a dream. Now, at least, I was in possession of my senses. The paws of some huge and real monster were pressing heavily upon my bosom--his hot breath was in my ear--and his white and ghastly fangs were gleaming upon me through the gloom.[17]

Entering deeper and deeper into unconscious realms, Pym encounters the monster fear, and he finds that this itself is strong enough to kill man--"I was perishing and perishing of sheer fright." Yet dream, by this time, has become, for Pym, almost synonymous with reality and the monster of his dream, now also becomes the monster of the awakened world. Even though Pym gradually becomes aware, that, at this stage, the horrible beast is merely his dog Tiger and that he has been actively hallucinating, his hallucination acts as a premonition of what is to come. Tiger will very soon become the ferocious beast of his dream, and fear, Pym will discover, can kill

---

[17] Poe, p. 763.

as efficiently in imagination as in reality. Moreover, it will not be so easy to explain away the horror with rational means.

In this state of growing anxiety, Pym makes one final desperate attempt to escape from the labyrinth, and although he succeeds, after great effort, in reaching the trap door, he finds that it is locked. Caught in the no-exit world of the chaotic unconscious, Pym becomes another victim of the horror which arises when man feels that he has been buried alive.

> My sensations were those of horror and dismay. In vain I attempted to reason on the probable cause of my being thus entombed. I could summon up no connected chain of reflection, and sinking on the floor, gave way, unresistingly, to the most gloomy imaginings, in which the dreadful deaths of thirst, famine, suffocation, and premature interment crowded upon me as prominent disasters to be encountered.[18]

Yet, there is a fateful irony which Poe deliberately sets to work here. Each time Pym thinks that his end is at hand, some element encourages him to be hopeful. At the next moment, however, this possibility is exhausted and consequently his anxiety mounts. Ravaged by a terrible beast, Pym finds that it is merely his dog Tiger. Hopeless because he is certain that he has been entombed alive, he finds a note from the upper world, brought by the Egyptian-like Messenger, "Anubis." But Tiger becomes a raging beast, and the note cannot be read upon first attempt. When it is, Pym can only decipher it as a message of doom. In moments of great stress, Poe has his narrator immerse himself in detail--in the physically tangible evidence that he is still alive, yet this realism does not lessen Pym's despair, since his hopes are one by one shattered. The see-saw psychology of hope and defeat is self-explanatory. In a modern context, however, it becomes symbolic of the anxiety state, itself, in which rages of lucidity are balanced by the absurdity so common to us not.

> The half certainty which I felt of being able to accomplish one of these two purposes in the last emergency [that is, calling for help or cutting his way out of the hold] had given me courage (which I should not otherwise have had) to endure the

---

[18] Poe, p. 766.

evils of my situation. The few words I had been able to read, however, had cut me off from these final resources, and I not, for the first time, felt all the misery of my fate. In a paroxysm of despair I threw myself again upon the mattress....[19]

Poe is bringing his narrator closer and closer to that ultimate happening. The expected is never to be fulfilled for what will happen to man must be something totally novel, yet something which he is doomed to await in a state of deepening anxiety for the entirety of his life.

Pym's stay in the deepest reaches of the unconscious world forces him into a state of continual delirium, wherein the lucid powers of deduction can only be used for irrational ends. His deliberately calm effort to read the message from the upper world results in his recognition that the message itself, is totally removed from the bounds of reason. Everything in this dark, labyrinthine depth is geared to reveal the chaotic barbarity of the underworld. A friendly dog becomes a raging beast, paralleling Pym's own decline from waking normality to primitive savagery and delirious madness--a state in which he is ruled by the irrational "imp of the perverse." Only his above-ground alter-ego can save Pym, and it finally returns in the form of Augustus, who brings the symbolic waters of grace and the light of rational powers.

But the full horror of Poe's world is that even above-ground, in the full light of day, man, aboard the <u>bateau ivre</u> of life, is subject to a chaotic brutality, which is in effect a mirror reflection of what goes on in unconscious realms. It is everyman's fate to be consciously plagued, formed, and reformed by the irrational powers of blackness, and Pym emerges from the hold only to find that the situation above deck is as horrible as the one below. Augustus, as he fills in the daylight events of his own adventure tells of a scene of the "most horrible butchery," mutiny and murder. The figures who people this scene are stark emanations of unconscious powers--

---

[19]Poe, p. 771

"the black cook,who in all respects was a perfect demon" leads the mutinous crew. Dirl Peters, a 'fantastic' type, from the black hills, is the complete embodiment of a Jungian gnome figure[20]--a symbol of the misty, mid-regions between the unconscious and consciousness. Depending on the way in which he is used, he can either be a beneficial force or a detrimental one, much like Blake's spectre, for he embodies all the contradictions of nature. Ferocious in appearance, Dirk is yet the instrument of Augustus' salvation. His lips, which on first glance seem to be twisted into a constant smile, when observed more closely appear as a horrific grimace. An Indian, he has the primitive's mastery of a dark knowledge. His characteristics gain in significance when, after Augustus' death, he replaces the youth as Pym's double, for it is for the most part due to the gnome's efforts that Pym survives the horrors of the barbaric world which he enters.

Having experienced living inhumation in the labyrinthine hole, Pym now reenacts this process on an external plane by appearing in the figure of a dead man. Life-in-death in the coffin of the vault suffers a reversal and becomes death-in-life as Pym disguises himself as Hartman Rogers. Both states have a terrifying effect on Pym's imagination, for they are both concrete encounters with the unknown and the indefinable.

> As I viewed myself in a fragment of looking-glass which hung up in the cabin, and by the dim light of a kind of battle lantern, I was so impressed with a sense of vague awe at my appearance, and at the recollection of the terrific reality which I was thus representing, that I was seized with a violent tremor, and could hardly summon resolution to go on with my part.[21]

But Pym, in his disguise, is merely playing at death, and although it serves as a kind of preparation for the hallucinative events which will confront him later on in his travels, the true terror of his impersonation is only fully realized in the effect which it produces on the rest of the crew. The mate, like Usher in his encounter, literally, with the resurrected

---

[20] C.G. Jung, Psyche and Symbol (New York, 1958), pp. 79-82.

[21] Poe, p.796.

Madeline, dies of fear. Poe is using the same psychology here as in his parable "Shadow," where several hysterical revellers are faced with a "vague,""formless and indefinite" shadow, who tells them he has come from the plains of illusion, which border on the entrance into hell.

> And the shadow answered,"I am SHADOW, and my dwelling is near to the Catacombs of Ptolemais, and hard by those dim plaings of Helusion which border upon the foul Charonian canal." And then did we, the seven, start from our seats in horror, and stand trembling, and shuddering and aghast, for the tones in the voice of the shadow were not the tones of any one being, but of a multitude of beings, and varying in their cadences from syllable to syllable, fell upon our ears in the well-remembered and familiar accents of many thousand departed friends.[22]

Although the latter context is the more poetical one, the greater effect is derived from the similar occurrence in Pym precisely because its existential base is stronger. Pym, himself, explains the mechanics of an appearance from "the old world of shadows."

> It is not much to say that remnant of doubt have been at the bottom of almost every such visitation, and that the appalling horror which has sometimes been brought about, is to be attributed, even in the cases most in point, and where most suffering has been experienced, more to a kind of anticipative horror, lest the apparition <u>might possibly be</u> real, than to an unwavering belief in its reality. But, in the present instance, it will be seen immdeiately, that in the minds of the mutineers there was not even the shadow of a basis upon which to rest a doubt that the apparition of Rogers was indeed a revivification of his disgusting corpse, or at least its spiritual image.[23]

Anticipative horror is usually the cause of disturbance, but in this particular case, the very reality of the appearance allows for no build up of anxiety, only a crushing blow.

Yet, for Pym himself, the experience is really a purgative one. Dead to the world in his coffin in the hold, he can only be reborn by manifesting this death outwardly. Having

---

[22]Poe, "Shadow--A Parable," p. 458.

[23]Poe, Pym, p. 798.

followed the umbilical cord of the hold to its logical extreme, the birth can only take place after the inner experience of death has been given objective value, and thereby severed from the merely psychic side of things. Pym's purgation, however, is a narrow one and his rebirth is not a re-entry into a new world where horrors are removed. Rather, he is reborn, or better, perhaps "relocated," into a new axis of the centrifugal force as it moves into a wider and wider rotation of disparity and disintegration. Pym's development, if it can be called such, is really a movement up the circular pattern of this spiral, so that his life, as Poe presents it, is essentially a series of thematic recurrences. He is continually subjected to a symbolic death-and-rebirth pattern as he moves up the hierarchy of apocalyptic instants, yet he shows no signs of developing maturity.

This is not a fault of style on Poe's part, but an inherent part of his vision. The human being, in Pym's set of circumstances, does not grow, for, as Poe reveals, man is always unprepared for that final happening, for death. From this point of view, maturation is impossible. Man is eternally a "youth" caught in the midst of life by the insurmountable and incomprehensible reality of death. For Poe, there can be no bifurcation between youth and maturity, no linear movement towards a point of adult consciousness. He is the only cosmic and total poet (such as Spenser, Milton, and Blake), who disallows the usual imaginative division between innocence and experience: man, he seems to say, can never be experienced in that single overwhelming reality of death.

Hence, the pattern of Pym, which parallels the narrator's life voyage, is a revelation of Poe's vision: eternal recurrence of symbols and themes, based on the eternal recurrence of existence--the circular movement of dream and waking. The limit of this eternal recurrence is death, the final apocalypse. But death is something which comes, and yet, takes place outside

the narrative, for the sum of existence, in Poe's vision, is an anxious expectation of that thing which will come from without. Pym's death, which occurs outside the narrative, is only another apocalyptic instant, though greater than that of the closing all-encompassing, white mist which can allow no description, no explanation, and no raison d'être. Yet, it is only "greater" if one has grasped the qualitative significance of each apocalyptic instant, because, in another sense, it is not greater. Nothing is greater or lesser in a circle where all portions are part of the same centre. And the ultimate apocalypse, which Poe describes, is merely a symbol of that final happening. Seen in the totality of things, it remains merely another cipher.

After Pym's return to the above-deck world, a further sequence of horrors ensues. A terrible storm overcomes the ship and reduces it to a mere floating carcass. The struggle now becomes a sheer struggle for survival against the fury of the elements. Ironically, the Grampus is unsinkable because of the nature of its cargo, so that the only death which would seem natural in this situation, the only death which Pym, at first, expects, is not to occur. Instead drowning is replaced by starvation and Poe continues his psychology of raising hope and then shattering it, with a view to increasing the anxiety of his characters. What they are actually undergoing is a conditioning process, which leads them towards an assent of the brutally irrational.

The first reversal of hope into anxiety arrives in the form of a large black Dutch brig carrying a crew of putrescent corpses. This bateau ivre, which "yawned about so considerably" and is steered in such an "awkward manner," is, in essence, the mirror image of the Grampus itself, with its crew of near-cadavers and its history of mutinous brutality. Disregarding the Grampus' crew's hope of rescue, this ship of death is another in the narrative's hierarchy of apocalypses and it comes

bringing the totally unexpected. A material image of Pym's own ultimate consummation, the presence and nature of the Dutch brig escapes all reasonable explanation. Even though Pym attempts to apply his deductive powers, they serve to no purpose--as explanation once did in the Ariel episode--and as he realizes, "It is utterly useless to form conjectures where all is involved, and will, no doubt, remain for ever involved, in the most appalling and unfathomable mystery."[24]

To keep their sense of reality intact in the midst of an irrational situation, Poe has the four survivors immerse themselves in the details of remaining alive, much as Pym had done in the hold. Pym, meanwhile, pretends to a sense of lucidity which the reader must be careful not to trust too profoundly, for it is evident that both his double figures--Augustus and Peters--are in states of the most irrational despair. This becomes increasingly apparent in the cannibalism scene. Here man is seen at his lowest ebb of victimization--the very primitive sources of unconscious life. Poe manipulates this scene in such a way that it becomes clear that he is deliberately raking the possible spirituality or symbolism of such a scene of ritual sacrifice and consummation--the essence of the Christian mass. Only the brute <u>fact</u> remains. The predators quench their thirst in the blood of their victim and feast on his dismembered parts. Parker is no eucharistic symbol, no Christ-figure, but a man being devoured by his fellow men. In the most materialistic manner possible, Poe describes the way the corpse is torn apart and the best parts preserved, and it soon becomes evident that this has been done to no purpose. Ironically, as soon as Parker is consumed, Pym has an insight concerning a way of obtaining food. The survivors have descended to the depths of irrational brutality, because this is the exxence of man, not because it was the <u>only</u> solution to their problem.

With the dismemberment and consummation of Parker and the subsequent death and putrefecation of Augustus--Pym's double--

[24]Poe, p. 811.

who is, like Parker, devoured by brute beasts, Pym has reached the point in the centrifugal motion where it turns upon itself and becomes centripetal. The utmost madness and irrationality, the complete loss of the centre of sanity has been attained in this spiral of disintegration. Now the journey back towards the centre commences, as the boat symbolically turns upside down and Pym and Peters begin their exploration of southern regions.

The centrpetal voyage to the centre of being parallels the journey away from the point of sanity, and Pym is once more subjected to the primitive savagery of man, a nightmare existence in labyrinthine depths and a symbolic death and rebirth process, before his ultimate experience ensues. Pym's new ship, the Jane Guy, comes upon a South Seas island which contains all the elements of a deeply unconscious dream landscape. Its inhabitants are totally black in color and have the same symbolic value as the ferocious cook abourd the Grampus. The bay in which the Jane Guy is anchored has a "black sandy bottom." The crew notices a strange species of black albatross, and everything about the island is totally unrecognizable to the waking consciousness.

> We saw nothing with which we had been formerly conversant. The trees resembled no growth of either the torrid, the temperate, or the frigid zones, and were altogether unlike those of the lower latitudes we had already traversed. The rocks were novel in their mass, their color, and their stratification; and the streams themselves, utterly incredible as it may appear, had so little in common with those of other climates, that we were scrupulous of tasting them, and, indeed, had difficulty in bringing ourselves to believe that their qualities were purely those of nature. ...The phenomena of this water formed the first definite link in that vast chain of apparent miracles with which I was destined to ba at length encircled.[25]

What Poe has achieved in creating here is akin to Baudelaire's mystical idea of "a world out of this world." The novelties which this logically inexplicable realm present are, in essence, a preparation for that <u>final</u> novelty which will provide a symbolic conclusion to Pym's travels.

---

[25]Poe, p. 852.

Pym and the crew of the Jane Guy succeed in partially accustoming themselves to this strange environment, yet just as they are bordering upon the ease which security permits, the wholly unexpected occurs and there is an apocalyptic descent to the depths which only Pym and Peters survive.

> ...I was suddenly aware of a concussion resembling nothing I had ever before experienced, and which impressed me with a vague conception, if indeed I then thought of any thing, that the whole foundations of the solid globe were suddenly rent asunder, and that the day of universal dissolution was at hand.[26]

This fall into unconscious depths duplicates Pym's earlier experience in the hold of the Grampus, although in this particular instance he is accompanied by his double, the versatile gnomic figure, Peters, who is accustomed to unconscious regions, and aids in bringing Pym back to the light of day. The repetitive quality of this fall illustrates what seems to be Poe's principle that the obsessional side of events, the brute fact of the single anxiety, doesn't itself develop and become enlarged through experience. The human condition, in isolation, remains constantly the same. Its symbolic aspect alone widens, so to speak, outside the narrative in the receptive mind, as the tale progresses along a hierarchy of apocalyptic moments. There is a sort of kinship of anxiety between the reader and the tale, and the two are linked by Poe's technique of suggestion. However, only the reader's experience of symbols of enlarged, since he is in possession of a certain objectivity in regard to the various adventures of the narrative. Meanwhile, a prototype anxiety and fear possesses Pym, a repetition of his earlier sensations in the ever-widening gyre of horror. This widening and closing circle of horror must be seen as a picture of what happens to the reader's apprehension as he approaches a pivotal moment of insight, an insight which is centrifugally and centripetally total.

---

[26]Poe, p. 861

> For a long time we gave up supinely to the most intense agony and despair.... I firmly believe that no incident ever occurring in the course of human events is more adapted to inspire the supremeness of mental and bodily distress than a case like our own, of living inhumantion. The blackness of darkness which envelops the victim, the terrific oppression of lungs, the stifling fumes from the damp earth, unite with the ghastly considerations that we are beyond the remotest confines of hope, and that such is the allotted portion of the dead, to carry into the human heart a degree of appalling awe and horror not to be tolerated--never to be conceived.[27]

Anxiety and horror are the essence of la condition humaine, for every man, like Pym, is subject to the irrational depths of dream which are akin to death, and he carries the remembrance of these moments into his waking existence. But, just as Pym has previously escaped from the limits of death, he will do so again, for Poe wishes man to travel freely from unconscious to conscious realms, from the boundaries of death to those of rebirth. First, however, the labyrinth of the unconscious must be explored, and, under Peter's guidance, Pym manages to do this with a degree of consciousness which would otherwise be impossible.

This time Poe's labyrinth forms a series of symbols which cannot be directly translated into waking terms. The equation for the symbol is another symbol which spells out "to be shady," "the region of the south"--as the note at the conclusion of the narrative tells us. Shadow or blackness, and whiteness are intrinsically connected in Poe's mind and both are descriptive of the unconscious depths and the apocalypse which he explores. The blackness is the point of total disintegration, of primitive savagery, and linked with it is the whiteness of the whirlpool, of the centripetal force which leads to oneness and hence also to destruction--the blackness of the underground vault which Usher's painting depicts, and the white radiance which emerges from its walls. There is no traditional white and black, good and evil

---

[27] Poe, p.861

distinction in Poe's work, for he is not dealing with a strictly moral context. The white of day and the black of night mingle and merge into a cosmological vision of man's human predicament. The whiteness of consciousness and the dark power of the unconscious, of the conflict between centripetal and centrifugal, may form a recurrent pattern of life, yet the two are so closely linked that they shadow into each other as man attempts consciously to explore unconscious depths, while he is eternally haunted by these same depths in his very act of exploration. Poe's vision of a human spiral, both ends of which merge in destruction, is the total blending whiteness or darkness at the end of either the centripetal of centrifugal movements.

While Pym explores the blackness of the underground labyrinth, his dream is, once again, concretely fulfill above ground, as the black inhabitantsoof the island massacre the crew of the Jane Guy in a manner which parallels the above deck mutiny aboard the Grampus. Since the hierarchy of apocalypses is now a downward or centripetal one, to be reborn from his death state in the labyrinth, Pym must act out the death-rebirth process by descending, rather than, normally, ascending. In his previous experience, Pym completed his rebirth by going above-deck and taking on the guise of the dead man. Here he must descend from the mountain cliff, in which the labyrinth is located, to the lower region of the shore. Involved in this descent is the sensation of vertigo, which man experiences as he gazes into the depths of the abyss. When he emerges from this momentary unconscious confusion, Pym is symbolically reborn into a world which is one step closer to the final apocalypse--final only because it is the final limit of what can be described by human conceptual powers. The passage in which Poe depicts Pym's vertigo is well worth quoting, for it reveals his full understanding of this complex psychological state--a state upon which Sartre bases his entire dialectic of human existential experience.

...Presently I found my imagination growing terribly excited by thoughts of the vast depths yet to be descended, and the precarious nature of the pegs and soapstone holes which were my only support. It was in vain I endeavoured to banish these reflections, and to keep my eyes steadily bent upon the flat surface of the cliff before me. The more earnestly I struggled not to think, the more intensely vivid became my conceptions, and the more horribly distinct. At length arrived that crisis of fancy, so fearful in all similar cases, the crisis in which we begin to anticipate the feelings with which we shall fall--to picture to ourselves the sickness, and dizziness, and the last struggle, and the half swoon, and the final bitterness of the rushing and headlong descent. And now I found these fancies creating their own realities, and all imagined horrors crowding upon me in fact. I felt my knees strike violently together, while my fingers were gradually but certainly relaxing their grasp. There was a ringing in my ears, and I said, "This is my knell of death!" And now I was consumed with the irrepressible desire of looking below. I could not, I would not, confine my glances to the cliff; and with a wild, indefinable emotion, half of horror, half of relieved oppression, I threw my vision far down into the abyss. For one moment my fingers clutched convulsively upon their hold, while, with the movement, the faintest possible idea of ultimate escape wandered, like a shadow through my mind--in the next my whole soul was pervaded with a longing to fall; a desire, a yearning, a passion utterly uncontrollable. I let go at once my grasp upon the peg, and turning half round from the precipice, remained tottering for an instant against its naked face. But now there came a spinning of the brain; a shrill-sounding and phantom voice screamed within my ears; a dusky, fiendish, and filmy figure stood immediately beneath me; and, sighing, I sunk down with a bursting hear, and plunged within its arms.[28]

When he emerges from this fall, Pym declares, "I felt like a new being." It is noteworthy that Peters, the gnome--a creature who is fully cognizant of both conscious and unconscious worlds--manages the descent without any lapses into vertigo, and it is through his knowledge that Pym is saved.

The last lap of Pym's journey begins as he and Peters set out in a canoe to the utmost limits of the southpole. The entire sequence is swathed in dreamy mists, for man is finally approaching that which is totally inexplicable in terms of deductive logic. Pym says, "I felt a numbness of body and mind--a dreaminess of sensation--but this was all."

---

[28]Poe, p. 875.

What Pym finds in this area of total whiteness is in contradiction to all expectations. Water is hot to the touch. A white powdery substance enfolds them, but it is not snow, and rather, resembles ashes. He and Peters have arrived in that sphere where opposites are united. Fire and ice blend into hot water and cool white ash in this realm of mystical apprehension where the psyche's opposing elements achieve a total integration. Traditionally speaking, Jung points out, this balance of starkly opposed forces such as fire and water, earth and air, is psychic and visionary ground, the alchemist's "philosopher's-stone" achieved. Pym has arrived at the visionary eye of the centripetal force, the sphere of poetical insight, the point of intuition, of oneness which Poe depicts in Eureka. The maelstroms and whirlpools which Poe describes are such intuition points--points which are usually strictly impenetrable. The curtain of "whiteness" which surroungs Pym is identical to intuition, since pure whiteness is achieved only when all elements of color whirl so rapidly around a centre that their distinctive properties are lost. The centripetal spiral has finally reached its quiet centre in the south pole--the quiet of excessive irrational whirling.

In Eureka, Poe points out that to achieve the point of total mystical intuition man must submit himself to "the mental gyration on the heel." "We need so rapid a revolution of all things avout the central point of sight that, while the minutae vanish altogether, even the most conspicuous objects become blended into one."[29] This"mental gyration on the heel" which allows all things to be blended into a mist of whiteness and oneness, is precisely the point Pym has reached at the conclusion of his narrative. The insight which he gains into this uncharted area at the farthest removes of human imaginary powers can only be conveyed by suggestion. The limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some immense and

---

[29]Poe, Eureka, p. 4

far-distant rampart in the heavens provides a vantage point for a sphere of total suggestivity. "At intervals there were visible in it wide, yawning, but momentary rents, and from out these rents, within which was a chaos of flitting and indistinct images, there came rushing and might, but soundless winds, tearing up the enkindled ocean in their course."[30] From this cataract emerges the larger-than-life human figure shrouded in white which closes the narrative.

What Poe is depicting here in highly symbolic terms is suggestive of the entire and unknowable sphere of human unconsciousness. White, the Pre-Socratics note, is the color of memory, and Poe's white cataract, like the "collective-unconscious," the "great memory-stored," contains many indistinct images. These images are "silent" because they cannot speak directly to man, since man's vocabulary is only an approximation of apocalyptic phenomena. They are contradictory, rushing and might, but soundless, because as Freud notes, at their primal sources, when they act as psychic manifestations, words absorb contradictions. The "figure" which emerges from this cataract is the core of all poetic imagination; It is human, yet larger than life, and it wears the white shroud of death and memory, because for Poe this is where all art begins and ends--abruptly.

Although this is the final apocalypse of Pym's narrative, unlike the ultimate oneness which Poe describes in Eureka, this particular grand consummation does not result in Pym's death. His death, the note reveals, is to take place some time later, off-stage, so to speak. Puzzling at first, this point gains in clarity only if Pym is looked upon as an artist, who, like Orpheus or Poe, sets out to look for that ultimate happening--death. Successful in his undertaking, Pym experiences what Levin terms "posthumous consciousness"--a conscious exploration

---

[30] Poe, p. 882.

of the unconscious realms of sleep and death. Like many of Poe's narrators, he retains his identity even after his experience of the unknowable, and suffers no recognizable change. Yet his story must remain unfinished, for Eurydice, who is the poet's ever lost "symbol" within death's realm itself, cannot be brought back into the light of waking reason, and will not permit explanation in deductive terms. It is the final step in the synchronized chain of apocalyptic instants, which, in their first appearances, could be deductively explained. Now, however, the deductive possibilities have been exhausted, and to attempt a deductive explanation at this final point would be more difficult than, and as formidable as, the expanded symbolism itself. The limits of reason and reasonable expression have been pushed to the breaking point. The final <u>material</u> death must take place outside the narrative, for it is the dark secret whose full knowledge is destruction. The voyage into the sources of death, which provides the symbolic framework of the narrative, is offset by Pym's real death, which, even though it is a hard material fact, gains symbolic value, as it is, itself, shrouded in the mystery of the unknown and the unstated.

Poe, whether intuitively or deliberately, is correct to end his tale on the note of whiteness, for in it he reveals a poetic dilemma which is peculiarly modern in its emphasis. The whiteness of <u>Pym</u> is the "whiteness of the blank page" which Mallarmé speaks of, and Poe's agony is the rage for statement, the search for the symbols which will allow him to place the black print on this blank page. Again, in classical terms, it is Orpheus trying to express Eurydice's departure, black upon white. Yet, the final page must remain white, must stay unwritten, whatever the artist's anxiety might be to fill it, for the artist cannot find the ultimate symbols which are revelatory of his own death. It is telling that Poe, on his death bed, cried out for Reynolds, the cartographer of his <u>ultima thule</u>, for the visionary territory, that particular

area which Poe wished to chart, was, strictly speaking, in advance of itself. Poe's artistic situation was akin to the medieval mapmaker's consious appraisal of limits to his knowledge of "unknown" lands. Like these men, he could intuit the presence of lands at the limit of his knowledge, but he could not totally assert that presence or its nature. Therefore, these lands of the Ultima Thule, become for Poe, the very symbolic absence from which his vision is composed. The regions from which the Raven emerges and the "sphere" of Ulalume exist in memory and in unconscious realms, yet their full significance can only be suggested, for that territory is, as yet, uncharted. The symbolic tools which Poe is striving to attain elude him. The "inexpressible" comes finally in word, form and shape only as the conscious history of other craftsman brings it to precision. Poe's work is a constantly open work-shop. One still hears the jeweller's hammer beating inside, only the hammer has changed hands.

Although Poe's poetic tools were not sharpened to a point of calculable precision, it is his greatness that he was consistent enough a poet to exploit, as well as he could, the symbolic aspect of this poetical absence--this ultima thule of the psyche. With the Symboliste poets, especially Mallarmé, this poetical "absence" becomes the very crux and marrow of statement itself. In effect, these poets are returning to the oldest poetical symbol there is--Orpheus lamenting the loss of his ideal Eurydice. Orpheus' voice (that is, poetry), arises at the moment of his realization that his one crucial action--his backward glance--has caused Eurydice to disappear, to create an eternal absence, this merest nothing on which the entire universe hangs, for Orpheus' lamenting song sends vibratory echoes into all realms. It is a stream of suggestivity on which the poetic universe is reconstructed around the absence of a land, a communicable symbol, a meaning. It is this, the one poet's deed --the

"looking back"--and the pure voice of lament, which constitute poetry. In fact, from Mallarmé's viewpoint, it is safe to state: "Hearing begins when there is nothing left to say."

Poe is not so much the intiator of modern poetry, as the first poet to suffer from that peculiar traumatic experience which we now call poetry. In his exploration of intuited, yet indefinable and uncharted realms, he is faced by the concrete value of the absence of these realms in man's day-to-day conscious existence. In attempting to define these realms, he is faced by a second absence--the absence of culturally viable symbols which will allow him to express this area of expanded meaning. His entire fictional universe hangs upon this intuition of an absence, which he invokes into being by the "power of words," the incantatory force of suggestive images of memory and death, until these very words shape his universe into a concrete material reality.

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Baudelaire, Charles — Histoires extraordinaires. (Paris, 1961.

Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires. Paris, 1961.

Poe, Edgar Allan — The Complete Works. 10 vols. New York, 1902.

The Complete Tales and Poems. New York, 1938.

Eureka, Marginalia, A Chapter on Autography, The Literati. Boston, 1884.

Biography

Allen, Hervey — Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe. New York, 1926.

Fagin, N, Bryllion — The Histrionic Mr. Poe. Baltimore, 1949.

Krutch, J.W. — Edgar Allan Poe--A Study in Genius. New York, 1926.

Hennessy, Una-Pope — Edgar Allan Poe--A Critical Biography. London, 1934.

Phillips, Mary Ed. — Edgar Allan Poe--The Man. Chicago, 1926.

Quinn, A.H. — Edgar Allan Poe. 2 vols. New York, 1941.

Winwar, Frances — The Haunted Palace. New York, 1959.

Woodberry, George E. — The Life of Edgar Allan Poe. 2 vols. Boston, 1909.

Letters

Ostrom, John, ed. — The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe. 2 vols. Cambridge, Mass., 1948.

Criticism

Astrov, Vladimir — "Dostoievski on Edgar Allan Poe," American Literature, xiv, 1942-1943, 70-74.

Bachelard, Gaston — "Introduction;" Les Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym. Paris, 1944.

La Psychanalyse du Feu. Paris, 1938.

Bailey, J.O. — "Sources for Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym , 'Hans Pfaal' and other pieces," PMLA, LVII (1942), 513-535.

Belgion, Montgomery — "The Mystery of Poe," Essays in Criticism, vol I, no. I (January, 1959).

Bezanson, W.E. — "The Troubled Sleep of Arthur Gordon Pym," Essays in Literary History. New Brunswick, N.J., 1960, 149-175.

Bonaparte, Marie — Edgar Poe, étude analytique 3 vols. Paris, 1958.

Cabau, Jacques — Edgar Poe par lui-même. Paris, 1960.

Cambiare, C.P. — The Influence of Edgar Allan Poe in France. New York, 1927.

Campbell, Killis — The Mind of Poe and other studies. Cambridge, Mass., 1933.

Chiari, Joseph — Symbolisme from Poe to Mallarmé. London, 1956.

Cody, Sherwin — Poe--Man, Poet and Creative Thinker. New York, 1924.

Davidson, Edward H. — Poe--A Critical Study. Cambridge, Mass., 1957.

Eliot, T.S. — "From Poe to Valéry," To Criticize the Critic. London, 1965.

Fiedelson, Charles Jr. — Symbolism and American Literature. Chicago, 1953.

Hamilton, Robert — "Poe and the Imagination," Quarterly Review, CCXXVIII, 514-525.

Hubbell, Jay B. — "Poe," Eight American Authors. ed. Floyd Stovall. New York, 1963.

Lafleur, L.J. — "Edgar Allan Poe as Philosopher," Personalist,XXII, 401-405.

Lawrence, D.H. — "Edgar Allan Poe," Studies in Classical American Literature. New York, 1930.

Lemonnier, Leon — Les Traducteurs d'Edgar Poe en France de 1845-à 1875. Paris, 1928.

Levin, Harry — The Power of Blackness. New York, 1958.

Moss, Sidney P. — Poe's Literary Battles. Durham, N.C., 1963.

Rans, Geoffrey — Edgar Allan Poe. London, 1965.

Robertson, J.W. — Edgar Allan Poe--A Psychopathic and Bibliographic Study. San Francisco, 1921.

Stovall, Floyd — "The Conscious Art of Edgar Allan Poe," College English, XXIV, 417-421.

Tate, Allen — "The Angelic Imagination;" "Our Cousin, Mr Poe;" The Man of Letters in the Modern World. Ohio, 1964. 113-145.

Valéry, Paul — "Situation de Baudelaire," "Au sujet d'Eurêka;" Oeuvres. 2 vols. Paris, 1957. 598-613, 854-867.

Wiener, Philip — "Poe's Logic and Metaphysic," Personalist, XIV, 268-274.

Wilson, Edmund — The Shock of Recognition. 2 vols. New York, 1943.

Winters, Yvor — "Edgar Allan Poe. A Crisis in the History of American Obscurantism," In Defense of Reason. New York, 1947. 234-261.