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EDGAR ALLAN POE'S JOURNEY AND ABYSS MOTIFS:
ORDER AND DISORDER

THESIS

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The key to an understanding of what Poe attempted to accomplish with his art lies in his depictions of order and disorder in the universe. Poe's explorations of order and disorder revolve around journey and abyss motifs exemplified in his imaginative approaches toward nature, conscience, art, intuition, and apocalypse. These imaginative approaches serve to unify Poe's work as a whole and emphasize his importance as a questing artist who not only sought to define the shape of reality in terms of stability and chaos but also sought to formulate a final metaphysical ordering of chaos and finitude.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The availability of balanced biographies and extensive textually oriented criticism of the works of Poe has reduced the biographical and psychological stumbling blocks which have for so long barred the way to a proper appreciation and understanding of Poe's art.¹ There is, however, a major obstacle left which still prevents some readers and critics from acknowledging the importance of Poe's work. This obstacle

¹ Early examples of twentieth-century criticism were, for the most part, biographically or psychoanalytically oriented. Such biographies as George Woodberry's The Life of Edgar Allan Poe, Personal and Literary, with his Chief Correspondence with Men of Letters (2 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), and Hervey Allen's Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe (2 vols. New York: George H. Doran, 1926) were supplemented and eventually supplanted by more temperate, scholarly studies of Poe's life. Arthur Hobson Quinn's definitive Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1941), and the concise, objective work of Edward Wagenknecht, Edgar Allan Poe: The Man Behind the Legend (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) form the nucleus of a series of more recent, more objective studies of Poe. The psychoanalytic criticism, as exemplified in D. H. Lawrence's Studies in Classic American Literature (Chapter VI. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), Joseph Wood Krutch's Edgar Allan Poe: A Study in Genius (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), and Marie Bonaparte's The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation (trans. John Rodker. London: Imago Publishing Company, Ltd., 1949) have, for the most part, been supplanted by the changing nature of literary criticism itself. The more recent critical dicta of literary criticism, perhaps taking a cue from Poe's own critical manifesto "Exordium," have tended to scrutinize and analyze the works of Poe more closely than his mind.

appears in the form of some readers' critical inability to perceive any consistent world view or view of reality in Poe's works. One modern critic, Vincent Buranelli, has summarized the complex and varied elements of Poe's view of reality:

Poe is both a dreamy fantasist ("The Valley of Unrest") and a cerebral logician ("The Purloined Letter"). He lingers with science ("Eureka") and is chilled by its abstractions ("To Science"). He resolutely closes his eyes to factual reality ("Ligeia") and examines it in detail ("Landor's Cottage"). He works with melancholy ("The Fall of the House of Usher"), and with humor ("Why the Little Frenchman Wears His Hand in a Sling"); with burlesque ("Bon Bon"), and with realism ("The Cask of Amontillado"). He probes, fascinated, into horrible obsessions ("The Tell-Tale Heart"), and gazes, enchanted, at ethereal beauty ("To Helen").²

Because of this apparently fragmented, and varied literary vacillation, some critics have concluded that Poe really does not have anything of real aesthetic value to say to modern man. T.S. Eliot, while acknowledging Poe's influence on French writers, has found the works of Poe to be the immature productions of a "powerful intellect . . . of a highly gifted young person before puberty" because Poe's productions lack that element "which gives dignity to the mature man: a consistent view of life."³ In his emphasis upon Poe's lack of a consistent view of life, Eliot is echoing Yvor Winters, who described Poe earlier as nothing more than "an excited sentimentalist" or "an explicit obscurantist" whose total work is

² Vincent Buranelli, Edgar Allan Poe (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. 19.

³ T. S. Eliot, "From Poe to Valery," The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe, Selected Criticism Since 1829, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1966), pp. 205-19. Future reference to this text will be cited The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe.

characterized by mere fragmentations of human experience, the lack of any apparent theme, and whose art is only "an art to delight the soul of a servant girl" but not that of "mature men."⁴ Both Eliot and Yvor Winters, therefore, equate the possession of a consistent world view or view of reality with an artist's aesthetic maturity.

While it is true, as Buranelli has noted, that Poe's work is extremely complex and varied, it does not follow, as both Eliot and Winters would have it, that Poe's work lacks a consistent view of reality. The clue to Poe's view of reality lies in the fact that in most of his tales and poems there is considerable movement by someone in some direction or other. This movement is especially present in Poe's poetry, where the dominant poetic theme, as Daniel Hoffman notes, is that "someone goes somewhere: a maiden dies, and her lover journeys in search of her spirit toward Dream-land, or Paradise, or The City in the Sea, or 'To regions which/Are Holy-Land.' That's the masterplot in the poems of Edgar Poe."⁵

This movement in Poe's poems is representative of Poe's work as a whole; that is, someone goes somewhere in search of something. Whether in "The Journal of Julius Rodman," where Rodman describes his fellow travellers as being "all like

⁴ The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe, p. 200.

⁵ Daniel Hoffman, Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 66.

brothers we appeared to be a band of voyageurs without interest in view--mere travellers for pleasure" ⁶ or in the Narrative of A. Gordon Pym, where Pym is an example of "the outcast wanderer--equally in love with death and distance-- [who] seeks some absolute Elsewhere" ⁷ Poe emphasized movement and the journey motif. These journeys most often take the form of some exploration of an aspect of nature, the psyche, the soul, or the universe itself. The journeys of Poe's protagonists seem to take them from the humdrum routine of the normal world into spheres or areas of existence where the rules and concerns of everyday life no longer apply, and the voyagers then try to communicate this fact to the reader. ⁸

Those critics who have failed to find the single thread or consistent view of life which characterizes Poe's literary works have either ignored the journey motif in Poe's work, or have failed to realize its importance to an overall understanding of Poe's consistent view of reality. Poe employs the journey motif because, as an artist, he, like so many of his own protagonists (e.g., Pym), was exploring the world around him in search of some metaphysical or cosmological cohesive force which might order the many fragmented sides of human experience

⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. George Woodberry (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 1938).

⁷ Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), p. 373.

⁸ Hoffman, p. 155.

that Poe so adeptly depicts. One critic has noted that Poe depicted fragmented human experience because he "was one of the first [artists] to suffer consciously the impact of the destruction of the traditional community and its values."⁹ In Poe's fiction, according to Robert Adams, there seems to be "a slipping clutch between the world of things and the world of person."¹⁰ The appearance of this "slipping clutch" or the fragmentations of human experience in Poe's work are usually of a dark nature, making man appear to be a one-dimensional, obsessed monster as the narrators of "Berenice," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Black Cat" seem to be; but, as G. R. Thompson has indicated, "often the sinister and terrible elements of Poe's world are in themselves neither sinister or terrible; they are simply observed in a special prospective. An irritating cat, a lady's handsome set of teeth, the gleam in an old man's eye--it is the exacerbated sensibility of the narrator that catches on these details, focuses on them, and generates around them magnetic fields of hate and fear."¹¹

These, then, are the kinds of fragmented human experience which, in the eyes of Eliot and Winters, do not represent the

⁹ W. H. Auden, "Introduction," The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe, pp. 22-30.

¹⁰ Robert Martin Adams, Nil: Episodes in the Literary Conquest of Void During the Nineteenth Century (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 49.

¹¹ G. R. Thompson, "Unity, Death, and Nothingness--Poe's Romantic Skepticism," PMLA, 85(1970), 297-300.

consistent view of reality which a mature man should possess. But Winters failed to notice the other kinds of narrators in Poe's works; that is, the voyageurs like Pym or Rodman, or the narrators of "Ms. Found in a Bottle," and "A Descent into the Maelstrom," or Mr. Vankirk in "Mesmeric Revelation," or the persona of "Eldorado." All of these protagonists seek something somewhere; they have a goal in mind--to explore the boundaries of reality, or the limits of order, to discover the possibilities for unity or disunity in the universe. Even Eureka, Poe's cosmological prose-poem, is a philosophical "quest for esthetic consistency and design"¹² in the universe. Poe's literary journeys are explorations of such phenomena as nature, conscience or soul, rationality, art, and the possibilities of apocalypse. Hoffman writes,

the final destination of Poe's discoveries is that bourne beyond the City in the Sea, 'Out of Space, Out of Time.' That secret knowledge toward which the soul on its phantom dreamship rushes ever onward is a knowledge beyond the cognition of our world, our clock ridden world, where Time, with its Condor wings, hovers over us, its dark shadow intervening between the soul and the pure light of that pure revelation.¹³

Most of Poe's works that employ this journey motif are characterized by a kind of quest for spiritual or metaphysical unity in the face of annihilation or nothingness,¹⁴ and the

¹² Ibid., p. 298.

¹³ Hoffman, p. 155.

¹⁴ Charles O'Donnell, "From Earth to Ether: Poe's Flight into Space," PMLA, 78(1962), 85-91.

desire of the Poe protagonist to find his place in a disordered universe.¹⁵

Even those critics who fail to find a consistent view of reality in Poe's works are forced to admit that if his work exhibits anything, it is, as Charles O'Donnell has so rightfully pointed out, that "civilization represents the no longer tenable objective world of rigid conventions, of strict laws, of clear meanings. Absolute decay, the once cheerful world of man's accomplishments, symbolized in his civilization, becomes during the dark night of the soul a vast enigma, a place of disquiet, chaos, mystery."¹⁶ It is this chaos, either physical or psychological, that Poe was so much concerned with, and it was the purpose of his protagonists' journeys to dreamland, Aidenn, the South Pole, or the center of the mind itself to discover whether or not chaos could be overcome or at least circumvented; as Edward H. Davidson says,

in its way Poe's problem was very much like that of Henry Adams or of Wallace Stevens: that of seeing unity in diversity, of conceiving the design behind the apparent chaos, of marrying matter and mind. Poe was not, strictly speaking, a 'philosopher' any more than Henry Adams and Wallace Stevens were to be. Yet he regarded his world and employed his art 'philosophically'; that is, his poems, short stories, and certain critical pronouncements were projections of the mind and the imagination toward a metaphysical order and were attempts to phrase not the 'why' but

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 91.

the 'what' of man, his mind and his world. The poem, the short story, the novel like Pym, became the symbolic enactment of man's search for logic and meaning.¹⁷

The fact that Poe employed the journey motif in his treatment of nature, conscience, rationality, art, and apocalypse does not necessarily mean that Poe was successful in finally circumventing material or mental chaos of the universe. The journey motif is equally balanced by the presence of an abyss motif: "the image of the abyss is in all of Poe's serious writings: the mirror in 'William Wilson'; burial alive; the 'tarn' into which the House of Usher plunges; the great white figure towards which Pym is borne by a current of the sea; the pit over which the pendulum swings; the dead body containing Valdemar; being walled up alive; the vertigo of maelstrom."¹⁸

The abyss motif in Poe is most often associated with images of the void, and it is the void which awaits Poe's unsuccessful voyagers. Many of Poe's tales and poems are concerned with the idea of falling, either through space, or into the grave; Poe seems to return to this experience of falling again and again, and many of his protagonists seem to

¹⁷ Edward H. Davidson, Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), p. 44.

¹⁸ Allen Tate, "The Angelic Imagination," The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe, pp. 236-254.

be destined for some final plunge into oblivion.¹⁹ Poe constantly employs the image of water, not as an image of rebirth, or purity, but as an image of nothingness which so often gets the better of his descending protagonists: "Usher, the Maelstrom-sailor, Arthur Gordon Pym, the narrator of 'MS. Found in a Bottle,' are all swallowed up or closely threatened with disappearance into black and fatal waters."²⁰

Many of Poe's voyagers seem to lose their way because their imaginative minds tend to lose themselves, as Davidson notes, "in the process of going or of making the material world conform to the imaginative premise [that is, there is a design behind apparent chaos]. The material world was too often unyielding; instead of the mind's willing a comprehension, the mind lost itself and became the object [as in 'The Raven' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher']."²¹

The fact that Poe is consistently sending one or another of his protagonists or his protagonists' minds on a journey through nature ("The Journal of Julius Rodman" and "The Domain of Arnheim"), conscience ("William Wilson" and "The Man in the Crowd"), rationality (the detective stories), art ("The Domain of Arnheim" and "Al Aaraaf"), and apocalypse (Narrative of A. Gordon Pym and "The Colloquy of Monos and Una") should be ample evidence that the journey motif is central to an understanding of Poe's mature vision of reality.

¹⁹ Adams, p. 44.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

²¹ Davidson, p. 55.

The fact that so many of Poe's protagonists encounter the image of the abyss or void ("The Pit and the Pendulum" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom") should be a useful tool in constructing the darker side of Poe's view of reality, and should sufficiently differentiate Poe's view of the universe from other writers who employed a journey motif in a religious context. Poe's explorations are explorations of the universe, but they are not explorations or investigations of man's religious relations to some distant heaven; Poe is more interested in hell and the abyss than in heaven.²²

For Poe, then, as Robert Adams has noted, "the fabric of the universe is transitory and sheer; it comes from Nothing, it will return via a great vortex to Nothing, the cold wind of Nothing can be felt even now blowing through its sleazy texture."²³ Yet Poe was not satisfied with this idea; he set out on an aesthetic quest for order, and, through the characters of his protagonists, engaged in a difficult quest to discover a single, metaphysical entity that would somehow enable all the disparate elements of the disordered universe to cohere.²⁴

The fact that Poe consistently sought a cohesive force which would somehow overcome the chaos of reality is as mature

²² Adams, p. 46.

²³ Ibid., p. 50.

²⁴ Davidson, p. 75.

a vision of reality as even Eliot or Winters should desire. This fact is even more remarkable when one considers the characteristics of Poe's "luckless universe."²⁵ For Poe's world is most often marked by horror, disorientation, the suspension of natural law, and the inability of his protagonists to discover the secret of order which will release man from his bondage to his own alienated soul; men in Poe's world are unable to act because there are no clear moral guidelines for action.²⁶

Whether or not Poe was successful in attaining this "knowledge" or these guidelines on his journeys into the heart of horror and confusion is the proper subject of this thesis. The fact that Poe consistently linked his journey motifs with images of the abyss suggests that he either felt that one could not, in the end, overcome disorder in a search for order, or that Poe felt that order and disorder are two sides of the same coin, and that eventually, as the final disintegration of so many of Poe's characters would seem to suggest, the imaginary voyage toward order must become a voyage toward disorder.²⁷ Poe's treatments of rationality, art, apocalypse, nature, and conscience must be analyzed carefully before his final, mature, and consistent vision of reality can be properly appreciated.

²⁵ Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 106.

²⁶ Davidson, p. 122.

²⁷ Levin, p. 107.

CHAPTER II

NATURE AS AN ABYSS

In 1923 D. H. Lawrence succinctly attempted to describe Edgar Allan Poe's artistic concern with nature by simply stating that "Poe has no truck with Indians or Nature. He makes no bones about Red Brothers or Wigwams."¹ While Lawrence may have been correct in saying that Poe "makes no bones" about Indians and the romantic conception of the noble savage, he was very much mistaken in his analysis of Poe's aesthetic concerns with the natural world. One of the most striking features of Edgar Allan Poe's works is the emphasis which Poe places upon the shifting nature of reality, natural or supernatural. This emphasis is marked by the creative depictions of the most unstable and disordered elements inherent in the natural and supernatural worlds. The heroes and personae of Poe's stories and poems are usually characters who have more than a little "truck" to do with nature. As Daniel Hoffman has noted, Poe's characters are usually

des hommes moyens sensuels, ordinary fellows in the midst of a humdrum life, taking an unexceptionable voyage, say, from Java, or perhaps, as in 'A Descent into the Maelstrom,' setting out on the daily run in

¹ D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (New York: The Viking Press, 1923), p. 65.

their fishing-smack. Only then are they overtaken by sudden and unexampled catastrophes, as though the laws of Nature, heeding some hidden behest, cause the very elements to rear up in violent manifestations inimical to the very existence of man and his works.²

Poe consistently links nature with violence; from "A Descent into the Maelstrom" to the Narrative of A. Gordon Pym to "MS. Found in a Bottle" Poe depicted nature as inimical to man. The one dominant motif running through almost all of his treatments of the natural and supernatural worlds is the abyss motif. The abyss motif, as Richard Wilbur has noted, is constructed in Poe's works through the clever manipulation of symbols, particularly the images of the void, the pit or tarn, and the whirlpool:

in "MS. Found in a Bottle," the story ends with a plunge into a whirlpool; the 'Descent into the Maelstrom' also concludes in a watery vortex; the house of Usher, just before it plunges into the tarn, is swaddled in a whirlwind; the hero of 'Metzengerstein,' Poe's first published story, perishes in 'a whirlwind of chaotic fire'; and at the close of 'King Pest,' Hugh Tarpaulin is cast into a puncheon of ale and disappears 'amid a whirlpool of foam.'³

As another critic, Daniel Hoffman, has summarized, the maelstrom image in "A Descent into the Maelstrom" and other stories and poems

proves to be Poe's singular and recurrent image for all natural processes, for the nature of Nature, the

² Daniel Hoffman, Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 138.

³ "The House of Poe," Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 100.

subliminal current in which our lives are unwitting participants.⁴

The chief characteristic of Poe's treatments of the natural abyss is the depiction of instability, restlessness, and ceaseless disorderings present in Nature. In "The Valley of Unrest," for example, Poe writes of Nature's unstable and changing motions:

The sad valley's restlessness.
 Nothing there is motionless---
 Nothing save the airs that brood
 Over the magic solitude.
 Ah, by no wind are stirred those trees
 That palpitate like the chill seas
 Around the misty Hebrides!
 Ah, by no wind those clouds are driven
 That rustle through the unquiet Heaven
 Uneasily, from morn till even,
 Over the violets there that lie
 In myriad types of the human eye---
 Over the lilies there that wave
 And weep above a nameless grave!
 They wave:---from out their fragrant tops
 Eternal dews come down in drops.
 They weep:---from off their delicate stems
 Perennial tears descend in gems.⁵

The emphasis here is on motion, on the disorder in Nature. Words such as "restlessness," "palpitate," "driven," "rustle," "unquiet," "uneasily," "wave," "weep," and "descend" depict nature here as anything but an ordered entity. Similarly, the poem "Dreamland" depicts the shifting aspects of a kind

⁴ Hoffman, pp. 138-139.

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. George Woodberry (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 1938), p. 963. All future reference to this text will hereafter be cited as Complete Tales.

of supernatural nature, or, as Hoffman has noted, a nature "inimical" to the existence of stability and man.⁶ In this poem the abyssmal, almost apocalyptic, aspects of nature are emphasized:

Bottomless vales and boundless floods
 And chasms, and caves, and Titan woods,
 With forms that no man can discover
 For the dews that drip all over;
 Mountains toppling evermore;
 Into seas without a shore;
 Seas that restlessly aspire,
 Surging, unto skies of fire;
 Lakes that endlessly outspread
 Their lone waters--lone and dead--
 Their still waters--still and chilly
 With the snows of the lolling lily.⁷

In this poem the fact that the vales are "bottomless" and the floods are "boundless" and the mountains topple "evermore" and the sea is without a shore illustrates again not only the restless, chaotic, and disordered motions of nature, but also Poe's habit of inverting or distorting "our expectations of a natural world. . . ." ⁸ In "Dreamland" Poe depicts, as Edward H. Davidson points out, "a place where everything that exists is in a state of disintegration, as though all matter and form were returning to a primordial condition of mere atomicity. . . ." ⁹

⁶ Hoffman, p. 138.

⁷ Complete Tales, p. 968.

⁸ Hoffman, p. 59.

⁹ Edward H. Davidson, Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), p. 82.

The reader's expectations of a natural world are no more brilliantly inverted than in Poe's poem "The City in the Sea" where "Resignedly beneath the sky/The melancholy waters lie,"¹⁰ and the only light present is light "from out the lurid sea" which "streams up the turrets silently" and the waves of the sea are "luminous."¹¹ Yet while there are waves, there are, at the same time, "no ripples" on the water; therefore, the sea is a "wilderness of glass" which is "hideously serene" until the waves acquire a "redder glow" and the very hours begin to breathe "faint and low" before the apocalyptic plunge into the abyss of Hell.¹² Here the laws of nature are inverted so drastically as to make the reader question whether or not nature can know any laws or any bounds. Chaos is emphasized in what Hoffman has described as an "antinatural vista"¹³; that is, a nature where disorder rather than order is the only natural law. Poe seemed to have an eye for the exception to or the suspension of the natural order. Even in a poem such as "Alone," which Poe grouped as one of "the crude compositions of my earliest boyhood,"¹⁴ he wrote that:

From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were---I have not seen
As others saw. . . .¹⁵

¹⁰ Complete Tales, p. 964.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hoffman, p. 191.

¹⁴ Complete Tales, p. 992n.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 1026.

That is, he was ever alert to "the cloud that took the form/
 (When the rest of Heaven was blue)/Of a demon in my view."¹⁶
 As Davidson analyzes, it is illuminating to "draw a line from
 the very early "Tamerlane" through "The Fall of the House of
 Usher" to "The Raven": all of them were studies of stages in
 consciousness when the real world slipped away or disintegrated
 and the mind found itself fronting the horror of its own lone-
 liness and loss."¹⁷ It is Poe's "demon in my view" that his
 characters confront in their excursions into the natural and
 supernatural worlds; and as Davidson noted, the demon assumes
 the form of alienation between the protagonist and the natural
 world around him.

This alienation between man and his natural surroundings
 is a characteristic feature which distinguishes the clash
 between man and the abyss of nature. In "MS. Found in a Bottle,"
 for example, the narrator is a lost or alienated soul even
 before he begins his trek through the abyss of nature: "of
 my country and of my family I have little to say. Ill usage
 and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged
 me from the other."¹⁸ This protagonist admits, as so many of
 Poe's characters do, to "a kind of nervous restlessness which
 haunted me as a fiend"¹⁹ and drove him into the journey which

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Poe: A Critical Study, pp. 122-123.

¹⁸ Complete Tales, p. 118.

¹⁹ Ibid.

was to lead him into the natural abyss. The sudden, chaotic manifestations of a disordered nature are emphasized in the first part of the story by Poe's clever contrasts between the dormant sea, "a more entire calm it was impossible to conceive,"²⁰ and the "wilderness of foam" which explodes from the same sea a few hours later to swallow the rational, unsuspecting mind of the narrator; he is transformed from the person who is least "liable . . . to be led away from the severe precincts of truth by the ignes fatue of superstition"²¹ to a mute companion of the old, superstitious Swede awaiting the final plunge into the abyss:

we waited in vain. . . . Eternal night continued to envelope us. . . . All around were horror, and thick gloom, and a black sweltering desert of ebony. Superstitious terror crept by degrees into the spirit of the old Swede, and my own soul was wrapt in silent wonder.²²

This superstition and this muteness on the parts of the old Swede and the narrator are characteristic reactions of Poe's rational voyagers who encounter the suspension of rational, natural laws attendant upon the approach of death and the abyss. In this particular case, it is the irrational presence of extended darkness which jars the narrator's view of reality; nature does not conform to his rational expectations:

²⁰ Ibid., p. 119.

²¹ Ibid., p. 118.

²² Ibid., pp. 120-121.

the sun arose with a sickly yellow lustre and clambered a few degrees above the horizon--emitting no decisive light. There were no clouds apparent, yet the wind was upon the increase, and blew with a fitful and unsteady fury. About noon, as nearly as we could guess, our attention was again arrested by the appearance of the sun. It gave out no light, properly so called, but a dull and sullen glow without reflection, as if all its rays were polarized. Just before sinking within the turgid sea, its central fires suddenly went out, as if hurriedly extinguished by some unaccountable power. It was a dim, silver-like rim, alone, as it rushed down the unfathomable ocean.²³

This presence of extended darkness is itself emblematic of the natural abyss in the works of Poe. In "A Descent into the Maelstrom," for example, the sky suddenly becomes so overcast that the fishermen are "unable to see each other in the smack"²⁴ and, much as in "MS. Found in a Bottle," the only light that is present is the strange light of the moon which serves only to illuminate the horrors of the abyss rather than to give the fishermen comfort from the darkness:

a singular change, too, had come over the heavens. Around in every direction it was still as black as pitch, but nearly overhead there burst out, all at once, a circular rift of clear sky--as clear as I ever saw--and of a deep bright blue--and through it there blazed forth the full moon with a lustre that I never before knew her to wear. She lit up every thing about us with the greatest distinctness--but oh God, what a scene it was to light up!²⁵

Similarly, in "The Pit and the Pendulum" the darkness of chaos is described as the darkness of the disordered universe,

²³ Ibid., p. 120.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 133.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 134.

"... the blackness of darkness supervened, all sensations appeared swallowed up in a mad rushing descent as of the soul into Hades. Then silence, and stillness, and night were the universe."²⁶ The narrator, then, is afraid to open his eyes because he fears that he will see only darkness, the nothingness of chaos, associated with the approach of the abyss:

I longed, yet dared not, to employ my vision. I dreaded the first glance at objects around me. It was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be nothing to see. At length, with a wild desperation at heart I quickly unclosed my eyes. My worst thoughts, then, were confirmed. The blackness of eternal night encompassed me. I struggled for breath. The intensity of the darkness seemed to oppress and stifle me.²⁷

This, then, is what the Poe protagonist, the once confidently rational voyager, is continually faced with in his explorations of the natural world: chaos, the suspension of natural law. Poe's voyagers seem to be seeking something on their journeys through nature, but the typical Poe voyager "discovers in nature a frightening variety of discordant and cancelling propositions."²⁸ Poe's universe, for the narrator of "MS. Found in a Bottle" and other stories, is, as Edward Davidson notes, "a universe of such individualism

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 246-247.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 240.

²⁸ Poe: A Critical Study, p. 220.

that virtually every atom has its own right and rule to exist"²⁹ with the resulting chaos and disorder of "cancelling propositions." When faced with these "cancelling propositions," even the most rational of men must face the irrational approach of the phenomenon of the abyss:

I could not help feeling the utter hopelessness of hope itself, and prepared myself gloomily for the death which I thought nothing could defer beyond an hour, as, with every knot of way the ship made, the swelling of the black stupendous seas became more dismally appalling. At times we gasped for breath at an elevation beyond the albatross--at times became dizzy with the velocity of our descent into some watery hell, where the air grew stagnant, and no sound disturbed the slumbers of the kraken.³⁰

It is interesting to note here that a chief characteristic of the alienation between the Poe protagonist and his natural environment is the anxiety created by the prolongation of chaos rather than the fear of death itself; it is the fear of the continuance of eternal suspensions of natural law that is more horrible than death, as the narrator in "MS. Found in a Bottle" depicts:

We are surely doomed to hover continually upon the brink of eternity, without taking a final plunge into the abyss. From billows a thousand times more stupendous than any I have ever seen, we glide away with the facility of the arrowy seagull; and the colossal waters rear their heads above us like demons of the deep, but like demons confined to simple threats and forbidden to destroy.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., p. 194.

³⁰ Complete Tales, p. 121.

³¹ Ibid., p. 124.

Similarly, in "The Pit and the Pendulum" the narrator fears the continuation of the anxiety which accompanies the encounter with the abyss more than he does the spectre of death itself:

what boots it to tell of the long, long hours of horror more than mortal, during which I counted the rushing oscillations of the steel! Inch by inch--line by line--with a descent only appreciable at intervals that seemed ages--down and still down it came! Days passed--it might have been that many days passed--ere it swept so closely over me as to fan me with its acrid breath. The odor of the sharp steel forced itself into my nostrils. I prayed--I wearied heaven with prayer for its more speedy descent. I grew frantically mad and struggled to force myself upward against the sweep of the fearful scimitar. And then I lay still and lay smiling at the glittering death, as a child at some rare bauble.³²

When the Poe protagonist finds himself face to face with the abyss of nature, or the suspension of natural law, he usually finds that all attempts at rationality are absurd and useless. In "MS. Found in a Bottle," for example, the narrator notes that even the "charts of navigation" aboard the phantom ship are "decayed" and useless.³³ All the tools of science and rationality, such as mathematical and navigational instruments go unused and lie "mouldering" about the ship.³⁴ Similarly in "The Pit and the Pendulum" the narrator employs his rational mind in the face of darkness and the abyss to explore his universe; that is, the darkened dungeon,³⁵

³² Ibid., p. 253.

³³ Ibid., p. 122.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 124-125.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 249.

and even comes to a conclusion that his universe is "50 yards in circuit."³⁶ But when enough light appears to enable him to confirm the conclusions of his rational exercise of mind, he find that "in size I had been greatly mistaken. . . . I had been deceived, too, in respect to the shape of the enclosure . . . ,"³⁷ that is, his rational exercise of mind in exploring his small, darkened universe had failed him in trying to measure the absurd dimensions of the abyss. Even in "A Descent into the Maelstrom" where the narrator saves himself by rationally tying himself to a small water cask³⁸ to avoid the final plunge into the maelstrom, the protagonist admits to the listener of his tale that the then popular, rational explanation of what causes the "moksoe-strom" makes no sense at all to the man who comes face to face with the abyss:

as to the former notion he confessed his inability to comprehend it; and here I agreed with him--for, however conclusive on paper, it becomes altogether unintelligible, and even absurd, amid the thunder of the abyss.³⁹

Similarly, in the Narrative of A. Gordon Pym, the rational natural laws of life become void and meaningless in the face of the abyss; in Pym

time recedes and ceases to have any measurable validity; food, the very basis of life, is just

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., p. 251.

38 Ibid., p. 139.

39 Ibid., p. 131.

out of reach or becomes putrescent; wine, a normal drink, brings a ravening madness to the drinkers; and society itself never stays the same--it is killing and cheating, a massive investment of man's deception of himself and his fellows⁴⁰

Pym, like the narrators of "MS. Found in a Bottle," "A Descent into the Maelstrom," and "The Pit and the Pendulum" cannot overcome the approach of the abyss through an exercise of reason because he is "lodged in a chance world of meaningless events. Anything may happen at any time; nothing is logical or rational . . . ;"⁴¹ therefore, an exercise of rationality is not only useless but absurd. As Edward H. Davidson points out, Pym's "chartless voyage is from an assumption that man lives by law and design, in his private life, and in his society, to a realization that man lives only by illusion."⁴² Such a state of illusion and absurdity is plainly demonstrated in Pym when Pym and his cohorts, trapped aboard the floundering hulk of the Grampus, illogically and irrationally call upon a passing shipful of dead bodies for their rescue:

twenty-five or thirty human bodies, among whom were several females, lay scattered about between the counter and the galley in the last and most loathsome state of putrefaction. We plainly saw that not a soul lived in that fated vessel! Yet we could not help shouting to the dead for help! Yes, long and loudly did we beg, in the agony of the moment, that those silent and disgusting images would stay for us, would not abandon us to become like them, would receive us among their goodly company! We were raving with horror and despair--.⁴³

⁴⁰ Poe: A Critical Study, p. 170.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 172-173.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 168-169.

⁴³ Complete Tales, pp. 809-810.

Poe's descriptions of the natural abyss to which his protagonists fall prey are usually charged with an aura of awe and horror which re-emphasizes the suspension of all rational, natural laws in the universe by presenting the final spectre of nothingness and non-being to the voyager. In "MS. Found in a Bottle" the narrator is overcome with the thought of his impending plunge into the abyss, so much so that he is even unable to give a name to his new state of consciousness:

a feeling, for which I have no name, has taken possession of my soul--a sensation which will admit of no analysis, to which the lessons of bygone time are inadequate, and for which I fear futurity itself will offer me no key. To a mind constituted like my own, the latter consideration is an evil.⁴⁴

The narrator finally admits to himself that the spectre of nothingness presented by the natural abyss acts upon the mind in a way in which rationality is left far behind. The mind comes to a point of stasis when faced with the natural abyss, until the final plunge:

oh, horror upon horror!--the ice opens suddenly to the right, and to the left, and we are whirling dizzily, in immense concentric circles, round and round the borders of a gigantic amphitheatre, the summit of whose walls is lost in the darkness and the distance. But little time will be left me to ponder upon my destiny! The circles rapidly grow small--we are plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool--and amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and tempest, the ship is quivering--oh God! and--going down!"⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 122.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 125-126.

Similarly, in "The Pit and the Pendulum" the narrator's mind is overwhelmed by the spectre of the abyss, so much so that he is unable even to speak; he is a rational man who has run out of answers and must now face the abyss and what the abyss means to him:

I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced--it wrestled its way into my soul--it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. Oh! for a voice to speak! Oh! Horror!--Oh! any horror but this! With a shriek, I rushed from the margin, and buried my face in my hands--weeping bitterly.⁴⁶

Clearly, then, this face-to-face confrontation with the natural abyss in the narrator's universe, this specter of nothingness, is much more than a mind can comprehend; it causes the reason to "shudder" and breaks the spirit of the rational mind. Even in "A Descent into the Maelstrom" where the narrator escapes the abyss, his face to face confrontation with it, and the suspension of the laws of nature, have left him "broken" in "body and soul."⁴⁷ And in the Narrative of A. Gordon Pym, the mind's stasis, that is, inability to act rationally and do anything but shudder in the face of the natural abyss of nothingness, is clearly seen in Pym's "listlessness" and Peters' "apathy":

March 8th--To-day there floated by us one of the white animals whose appearance upon the beach at Isalal had occasioned so wild a commotion among

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 256.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 127.

the savages. I would have picked it up, but there came over me a sudden listlessness, and I forebore. The heat of the water still increased, and the hand could no longer be endured within it. Peters spoke little, and I knew not what to think of his apathy. Nu-Nu breathed, and no more.⁴⁸

Clearly, then, in four of Poe's most extensive treatments of the natural abyss in "MS. Found in a Bottle," "A Descent into the Maelstrom," "The Pit and the Pendulum," and the Narrative of A. Gordon Pym the mind of the Poe protagonist is overcome by the effects of irrationality, so much a part of the suspension of natural laws. If, as Vincent Buranelli has said, Poe wished to present not nature per se, but "the general intention of nature,"⁴⁹ then Poe must have viewed nature in a rather restricted, violent light. After all, such works as "The Lake," "Fairyland," "MS. Found in a Bottle," "A Descent into the Maelstrom," the Narrative of A. Gordon Pym, and "The City in the Sea" all present the sea, perhaps Poe's dominant natural image, "as generally cold and dangerously violent, as lifeless and melancholy"⁵⁰ and malevolently unpredictable. Man's mind is subject to being overwhelmed by the suspension of rationality and natural law at any time. Nature may arise in the form of a whirlpool or whirlwind to engulf the unsuspecting voyager, or, at the very least, send a wind to chill

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 881.

⁴⁹ Vincent Buranelli, Edgar Allan Poe (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966), p. 59.

⁵⁰ Burton R. Pollin, Discoveries in Poe (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 148.

and kill the beautiful Annabel Lee.⁵¹ Nature does, in the major portion of Poe's works, seem "inimical" to man. Poe is not satisfied with depicting the many abysses in nature; he goes on to explain why nature is inimical to man.

In Poe's tale "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" two spirits converse after death and discuss the state of life on earth. Monos points to the great gap that has grown between men and nature because of man's "progress" away from nature: "mean-time huge smoking cities arose, innumerable. Green leaves shrank before the hot breath of furnaces. The fair face of Nature was deformed as with the ravages of some loathsome disease."⁵² At least one prominent critic, Richard Wilbur, sees this tale as illuminating Poe's descriptions of "inimical" nature in his works; Wilbur feels that Poe depicted nature as diseased, contaminated, and violent towards man because man himself had contaminated nature. Nature, in other words, in Poe's works, has turned upon man:

the planet Earth, according to Poe's myth of the cosmos . . . has fallen away from God by exalting the scientific reason above the poetic intuition, and by putting its trust in material fact rather than in visionary knowledge. The earth's inhabitants are thus corrupted by rationalism; their souls are diseased; and Poe sees this disease of the human spirit as having contaminated physical nature. The woods and fields and waters of the Earth have thereby lost their first beauty, and no longer clearly express God's imagination; the landscape has lost its original

⁵¹ Complete Tales, p. 958.

⁵² Ibid., p. 446.

perfection of composition, in proportion as men have lost their power to perceive the beautiful.⁵³

Poe's protagonists then are victims of a nature that has been corrupted by man himself. The abyss in nature which threatens man is emblematical of the abyss, the void, which is in man himself.

At least one of Poe's protagonists, Ellison in "The Domain of Arnheim," tries to impose "a certain symmetry"⁵⁴ upon nature in order to refurbish nature, and make nature once again beautiful and harmonious with the laws of symmetry, rationality, and creativity rather than with the forces of destruction and chaos it has so frequently become allied with. Ellison wishes to enable man and nature once again to live together free from the appearance of the spectre of nothingness or nonbeing in the form of the natural abyss. As Daniel Hoffman points out, what Ellison "undertakes is nothing less than the re-creation of nature, making landscape-gardening into a species of poetic composition. . . ."⁵⁵ Ellison, therefore, in his construction of a landscape-garden artificially creates an "earthly paradise"⁵⁶ where the natural

⁵³ Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 100.

⁵⁴ Harry Levin, The Power of Darkness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 125.

⁵⁵ Hoffman, pp. 190-191.

⁵⁶ Robert D. Jacobs, "Poe's Earthly Paradise," American Quarterly, XII (1960), 404-413.

abyss plays no part. Ellison tries to "arrange nature in an intelligible order"⁵⁷ creating order where there is none.

Of course, such a man-made ordering of nature is creative rather than destructive, but it is still artificial. Poe had earlier in his career depicted a taste for "artificial" nature in "The Journal of Julius Rodman." In this aborted attempt at a fictional western narrative it is interesting to note that the kind of nature which Julius Rodman felt most comfortable with was an artificial kind of nature. Rodman praises flowers which are "more like art than nature"⁵⁸ and almost swoons as he views some scenery which "rather resembled what I had dreamed of, when a boy, than an actual reality;"⁵⁹ Rodman praises nature when it resembles "an artificial flower garden"⁶⁰ and praises a "terrestrial paradise" of artificial-like nature.⁶¹

In "The Domain of Arnheim" nature is viewed as something imperfect which can be improved upon by the artificial creativity of the artist. The fact that Ellison looks upon nature as something which must be improved actually emphasizes the abysmal condition of nature before the landscape-gardener

57 Ibid.

58 Complete Tales, p. 291

59 Ibid., p. 293.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., p. 294.

attempts to improve it. Ellison knows that

no such combination of scenery exists in nature as the painter of genius may produce. No such paradises are to be found in reality as have glowed on the canvas of Claude. In the most enchanting of natural landscapes, there will always be found a defect or an excess--many excesses and defects.⁶²

Although it is not explicitly stated in "The Domain of Arnheim," one cannot help feeling that the artificial attempts of an Ellison to "save" mankind "by lending form and expression to the inchoate stuff, the raw material nature furnishes . . ." ⁶³ is an attempt by one of Poe's protagonists, through the instrument of landscape-gardening, to reapply somehow the laws of rationality and order to a disordered universe. One critic, Jeffrey A. Hess, however, has pointed out that by using the "Edenic garden" as the symbol for harmonious, natural reality, Poe "makes the possibility of achieving such perfection extremely ambiguous; for when the creator is man, it is nearly impossible to separate the symbol of Paradise from that of Paradise lost."⁶⁴ This statement is certainly true when one reflects upon the final plunge or narrowly averted final plunge into the natural abyss which so many of Poe's voyaging protagonists make. It seems clear that Poe did not fully

⁶² Complete Tales, p. 607.

⁶³ Complete Tales, p. 413.

⁶⁴ Jeffrey A. Hess, "Sources and Aesthetics of Poe's Landscape Fiction," American Quarterly, 22(1970), 177-189.

convince himself that disordered nature could be re-ordered,
and that the natural abyss could be finally eliminated or
overcome.

CHAPTER III

CONSCIENCE AS AN ABYSS

Just as Poe was firmly convinced that nature actually knows no laws and can violate so-called natural laws at any time, he also believed that the mind of man itself, or at least a part of man's mind, could and often does work against man's well-being. In his Narrative of A. Gordon Pym, Poe depicts the dark workings of Pym's mind and how his mind almost destroys him as effectively as could any natural catastrophe. This depiction occurs when Pym and his cohort Dirk Peters choose to descend the face of a precipice in order to escape the natives of Tsalal. The depiction of Pym's descent is important because of what it reveals about the mind of Pym and man's mind in general. As Pym descends the face of the huge precipice with a rapid movement in order to hide his fear of the descent from himself, he soon discovers that his mind begins to exert a will of its own:

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 endeavored 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 a 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 heart, and plunged within its arms.¹

Although Pym was saved from his death by Peters, the important point to note about his experience in regard to Poe's work as a whole is that he was literally overcome by some dark force within his own mind that caused him to let go his grasp upon the cliff. Pym was saved, but other Poe protagonists who fall prey to this inner destructive force are not so lucky. Just as Poe depicted the natural, external abyss or force for disorder and chaos which lies in man's path, so too did he

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. George Woodberry (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 1938), p. 875. All future reference to this text will hereafter be cited as Complete Tales.

depict an internal, psychological force for disorder and chaos; the precipice passage from Pym is one of Poe's best illustrations of the workings of this inner force, the abyss of conscience.

Pym apparently is not forced to come face to face with the abyss of conscience per se, but he does confront the darker, more destructive side of his mental faculties, the darker side of conscience itself, the phenomenon that Poe so aptly calls "the imp of the perverse." In Poe's tale "The Imp of the Perverse" the narrator describes the "imp of the perverse" as a "radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment"² which causes men to act "for the reason that we should not. In theory, no theory can be more unreasonable; but, in fact, there is none more strong."³ Thus, the imp of the perverse is that irrational, inexplicable, internal force within the minds of men which causes men to act in utterly self-destructive ways. In "The Imp of the Perverse," as in Pym, Poe uses the abyss motif to describe one of man's primary motivating factors:

We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss--we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably we remain. By slow degrees our sickness and dizziness and horror become merged in a cloud of unnameable feeling. By gradations, still more imperceptible, this cloud assumes shape, as did the vapor from the bottle out of which arose the genius in the Arabian Nights. But out of this our cloud upon the recipice's edge, there grows into palpability a shape, far more terrible than any genius or demon of a tale, and yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of

² Ibid., p. 280.

our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height. And this fall--this rushing annihilation--for the very reason that it involves that one most ghastly and loathsome image of death--for this very cause do we now the most vividly desire it. And because our reason violently deters us from the brink, therefore do we the most impetuously approach it. There is no passion in nature so demoniacally impatient, as that of him who, shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge. To indulge, for a moment, in any attempt at thought, is to be inevitably lost; for reflection but urges us to forbear and therefore it is, I say, that we cannot. If there be no friendly arm to check us, or if we fail in a sudden effort to prostrate ourselves backward from the abyss, we plunge, and are destroyed.⁴

The reference to "the delight of its horror" when speaking of this primitive impulse distinguishes, as Joy Rea has pointed out, the difference between "conscience" as most men know the word, the the phrase "the imp of the perverse" Poe's protagonists so often encounter as conscience:

the difference between conscience and impulse is that conscience has to do with force and impulse has to do with delight. . . . For the narrator in 'The Imp of the Perverse' the thought of doing what he should not chills the marrow of his bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror.' This fierce delight comes to him from thinking about what it would feel like to fall into an abyss; and the longer he can delay the fall, the longer will his delight last.⁵

In his tales, Poe's treatment of conscience is almost exclusively limited to a treatment of the darker side of

⁴ Ibid., pp. 282-283.

⁵ Joy Rea, "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" Studies in Short Fiction, 4(1966), 57-69.

conscience, the imp of the perverse. Poe's characters suffer terribly for their deeds and thoughts, but the emphasis is on the imp of the perverse in man which not only causes him to do that which he should not, usually the taking of another's life, but also causes man to destroy himself, usually through confession or self-revelation. Conscience is usually thought of as a force for redemption; that is, without conscience man rises no higher than the level of a brute. In Poe's tales, however, conscience itself is perverted in the form of the imp of the perverse, and instead of remorse, repentance and amendment for crimes committed, Poe's characters seek self-torture, self-flagellation, and inevitable destruction for those crimes committed. Conscience is usually thought of as a guide or moral arbiter which pains the perpetrator of crime into becoming aware of his crime and into doing something constructive about rectifying his error. The imp of the perverse, or perverted conscience in Poe's tales, however, first of all awakens the protagonist into the delight of committing crime, and then convinces him of the final necessity of self-destruction rather than self-reconstruction after the crime has been perpetrated. The imp of the perverse, then, is Poe's own unique version of an internal force that is supposed to be man's one redeeming feature; just as Poe ignored the conventional views of nature and natural laws, so too did he ignore the conventional analysis of conscience. The moral

world in Poe's treatment of conscience is turned upside down.

Edward H. Davidson notes that the inner world of Poe's protagonists

is one in which the world is itself either just begun or just finished but the people in it are condemned to live as if they are in some long aftertime of belief and morality. . . . They are forced to believe and exist for reasons that have long ceased to have any meaning. No one understands or can interpret, in this moral region of Poe's lost souls, why he must be punished; yet the penalty for any moral infraction is frightful and all the more terrifying because no one knows why it must be administered. The punishment comes not from a church, a law, or even from society: it comes from some inner compulsion of the evil-doer himself who suffers from what Poe otherwise terms 'perversity': he must do evil, and yet he wants to be punished and suffer. Thus he has willed his crime and he wills his retribution.⁶

For Poe, then, the abyss of nature is not the only abyss which may jeopardize man's journeys through this life; man's own inner nature, his conscience, may become twisted or perverted and may lead man into crime rather than away from it and into destruction rather than into redemption.⁷

In "The Tell-Tale Heart," for example, the non-rational but irresistible nature of the imp of the perverse is described by the narrator at the very beginning of the story:

it is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire.⁸

⁶ Edward H. Davidson, Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), p. 189.

⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

⁸ Complete Tales, p. 303.

The narrator here is just as mystified as the reader in trying to ascribe a motive to an apparently motiveless crime. The narrator even tries to enlist an ancient superstition, the spectre of an Evil Eye⁹ in order to explain an irrational act with even more irrationality. It is interesting to note here a protagonist who embraces superstition in order to explain away his perverse actions. Similarly, in "The Black Cat" the narrator lays the groundwork of superstition by mentioning his wife's "tincture" of fear of black cats and by describing the second black cat in such detail as to raise the possibility of reincarnation.¹⁰ The protagonist seems to leap at these superstitious straws to explain his actions because the truth, the idea of the imp of the perverse, is just as irrational and perhaps an even more frightening explanation of motive than superstition. The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" knows what it is to feel the surge of inner terror within his mind as the "imp" took hold of his faculties and made its relentless way from idea to act, terrible act. After all, the narrator states that he too, like the old man, has known the awe of inner turmoil:

it was not a groan of pain or of grief--oh, no!--it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me.¹¹

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 223-230.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 304.

The narrator thus admits that something deep inside him, his imp, has disturbed and distracted him for "many a night" with a terror akin to that experienced by the old man as he waits for death; the narrator's terror, however, unlike the old man's, is a part of his own nature, his inner makeup, his mental composition. The narrator has long been a victim of the imp; his murder of the old man is the inevitable result of the many nights he spent "hearkening to the death watches in the wall."¹²

The fact that the old man's murder was the inevitable result of the dark seethings of the narrator's purposeless imp does not, however, completely explain the full operation of this inner abyss; the worst is yet to come for the protagonist. The imp not only compels the narrator to do that which he should not; that is, kill an old man he loved, but the imp must now also seal the fate of the narrator by compelling him to destroy himself with either confession or self-revelation. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" the imp makes its commands known through the sense of sound, or the imagined beating of the old man's heart. It is the imagined reverberation of the old man's heart which finally drives the narrator into furious action causing his legs to move in a death-strike:

now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as the watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. . . . But the beating grew louder,

¹² Ibid., p. 304.

louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me--the sound would be heard by a neighbor! The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked one--once only.¹³

Although the possibility of the beating of the old man's heart being heard by a neighbor seems ridiculous to a mind not caught in the compulsive non-logic of the imp of the perverse, it is all too possible and probable to a mind controlled by this inner abyss.

The narrator's imp of the perverse again betrays his sense of sound as the narrator confidently and cheerfully converses with the investigating police officers in the very room where the narrator murdered the old man. The narrator's imp compels him to lead the officers to the very spot where the old man's dismembered corpse lies beneath the floor, and, thus setting up the narrator for the final culmination of the destructive inner force, the imp proceeds to alter the narrator's confident demeanor:

but, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and chatted. The ringing became more distinct:--it continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling; but it continued and gained definitiveness. . . . I gasped for breath--and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly--more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations, but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! What could I do? I foamed--I raved--I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards,

¹³ Ibid., p. 305.

but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder--louder--louder! . . . I felt that I must scream or die!--and now--again!--hark!louder! louder! louder! louder!--14

The narrator, of course, believes that he is hearing the beating of the murdered old man's heart; consequently, he tears up the floor boards to reveal his crime. As Daniel Hoffman has pointed out, the narrator actually hears his own heart,¹⁵ and it is the imp of the perverse which, first, caused the narrator to commit the crime, and, second, caused the narrator to imagine that he heard a dead man's heart; consequently, he revealed his crime. The victim of the inner abyss, the imp of the perverse, is doubly damned: (1) he is compelled to commit crime, and (2) he is compelled to destroy himself through self-revelation. As Hoffman has noted, it is not that the police in "The Tell-Tale Heart" are ministers of justice; "they are mere expressions of the narrator's compulsion to unmask and destroy himself by finally admitting the crime he had committed."¹⁶ The only minister of justice in Poe's tales of compulsion is the imp of the perverse, and the only justice is the justice of self-destruction. Poe's other tales of compulsion follow a similar pattern.

In "The Black Cat," for example, the imp of the perverse first gains a foothold upon the narrator's mind by leading him

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 305.

¹⁵ Daniel Hoffman, Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 232.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 190.

to drink. After having been introduced to "the disease Alcohol"¹⁷ by the imp, the narrator's once pleasant and happy moral constitution begins to deteriorate: "I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length I even offered her personal violence. My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition. I not only neglected, but ill-used them."¹⁸ Eventually, the narrator not only cuts an eye from Pluto, his cat, but also goes further and hangs the cat out of "perversity":

that [perverseness] urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I inflicted upon the unoffending brute. One morning, in cold blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree;-- hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence.¹⁹

The reason that the narrator of "The Black Cat" gives for hanging the cat, that is, because it had loved him and given him no offense, clearly describes the inner abyss--the imp of the perverse--in action. Just as the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" killed a man who had loved him and whom he had loved, the narrator of "The Black Cat" kills a cat that had loved him and he had loved. Poe's compulsive protagonists

¹⁷ Complete Tales, p. 224.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 224.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 224-225.

are so befuddled by the imp that love becomes a motive for murder. Hatred, however, self-hatred, is still the motive for self-destruction via the medium of self-confession or self-revelation of one's crime. Just as the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is compelled by the inner abyss, the imp of the perverse, not only to kill an old man he loves but also to lead police investigators to the very spot where the corpse lies hidden, so too does the narrator of "The Black Cat" kill a woman he had loved, and lead police investigators to the very wall which conceals her corpse. He even calls the investigators' attention to the wall by confidently tapping it with a cane which he carries.²⁰ It is as if the narrator has no choice but to reveal the corpse because it is the desire for self-destruction which motivates the narrator's foolish action. As James Gargano notes, the narrator of "The Black Cat" is the kind of self-destructive personality who, because he has fractured the world into good and evil, black and white, must experience the outer world "turn against him to the extent that he turns against himself."²¹

Similarly, in "William Wilson," another of Poe's tales depicting the impulse of self-destruction and surrender to the overpowering inner abyss, the narrator fights with a part of himself only to be doomed to defeat from the very beginning.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 230.

²¹ Studies in Short Fiction, 119-126.

In the beginning of the tale the narrator questions what has happened to him and how much control, if any, he could have exercised over his inner nature:

I would have them [men] believe that I have been, in some measure, the slave of circumstances beyond human control. I would wish them to seek out for me, in the details I am about to give, some little oasis of fatality amid a wilderness of error. I would have them allow-- what they cannot refrain from allowing--that, although temptation may have erewhile existed as great, man was never thus, at least, tempted before--certainly never thus fell. And is it therefore that he has never thus suffered? Have I not indeed been living in a dream? And am I not now dying a victim to the horror and the mystery of the wildest of all sublunary visions?²²

When the narrator asks "Have I not indeed been living in a dream," he admits that the spell of perversity he has suffered has left him baffled; the imp is inexplicable, non-rational, non-logical, but all powerful, and unrelenting. The whole point of "William Wilson" is not that Wilson is destroyed by conscience, but that he himself destroys his conscience, the other Wilson, and he does so because he is prompted by his imp of the perverse to choose a path of self-destruction. No man can be more hopelessly destroyed than the man who destroys his own conscience, and Wilson is such a man. As long as Wilson was susceptible to the interventions of the other Wilson who betrays his cheating at cards and his attempt to seduce the Duchess Di Broglio, Wilson's fate was not hopeless and his self-destruction not necessarily inevitable; but because the imp of the perverse grows so powerful in Wilson, he is

²² Complete Tales, p. 626.

forced to extinguish his one redeeming factor, conscience, and seal his self-destruction. It is not Wilson who has "conquered" conscience; it is Wilson's inner abyss, the imp of the perverse that conquers it. Such a triumph by the imp is a triumph of the forces of chaos over the forces of order, but such a triumph has its price as the other Wilson points out:

You have conquered and I yield. Yet henceforth are thou also dead--dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope! In me didst thou exist--and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.²³

The only one of Poe's tales of compulsion which seems to deviate from the pattern of perversity and self-destruction is "The Cask of Amontillado," and yet even this tale does not differ drastically from "The Imp of the Perverse," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Black Cat." The narrator of "The Cask of Amontillado" is very vague, suspiciously so, about "the thousand injuries" and the "insult" which Fortunato has supposedly given him.²⁴ It should be noted that Montresor does not speak ill of Fortunato; he describes him as "a man to be respected and even feared" and as a man who has a "good nature" that may be imposed upon.²⁵ To anyone who has read the excuses or rationalizations for murder in Poe's other compulsive tales, the so-called and obviously exaggerated "thousand injuries" of Fortunato sounds akin to the "Evil Eye" and the

²³ Ibid., p. 641.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 214.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 214-215.

reincarnation rationalizations in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat." The fact that Fortunato never doubts Montresor for a second suggests that their relationship could not have been as strained as Montresor would have the reader believe. Again it looks as if one of Poe's protagonists is acting for the reason that he should not; that is, he is victim to the imp of the perverse. James Gargano has noted Montresor's divided psychological nature and compared it with Poe's other compulsive protagonists. Like them, Montresor projects his "own internal confusions into the external world"²⁶ and is forced to rationalize the non-rational after the act of destruction which his internal chaos, supervised by his imp of the perverse has driven him to enact. Although Montresor does not reveal his act for fifty years, unlike other Poe protagonists who violently destroy themselves through immediate self-revelation, the fact that he does finally reveal his deed and ends his tale with the phrase "In pace requiescat!"²⁷ makes one wonder if the phrase is ironic and just how much peace Montresor has managed for himself for half a century. Montresor is a man who is not likely to have rested at ease with himself for fifty years. He is, after all, the man who, upon hearing Fortunato's "succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form" is "thrust . . .

²⁶ Studies in Short Fiction, 119-126.

²⁷ Complete Tales, p. 279.

violently back" for a few moments and then re-echoes the screams of Fortunato with screams of his own.²⁸ It is as if the screams of the tortured are answered by the screams of the self-tortured, of the man who is in the relentless grasp of the imp of the perverse. Half a century of living with such echoes is surely much more horribly self-destructive than the hangman's noose in "The Imp of the Perverse."

Poe's protagonists then, even if they are lucky and can escape the physical abyss of nature, may not be lucky enough to escape the abyss of their own natures and their own imps of the perverse which force men to do that which they should not in an effort to destroy themselves. Poe's characters are all too successful at destroying themselves. As Edward H. Davidson has summarized, Poe seemed to have had a conviction that man's life "consists of the disjunction of sides of the self: various elements in the human psyche or being are forever at war with each other; tragedy is always present because, in the inevitable bifurcation, one element is bound to obtain control and thereby exert such dominance that the human being is separated not only from the normal condition of a balanced selfhood, but from his fellows and from the world around him."²⁹ This dominant "element" that is likely "to obtain control" is the imp of the perverse.

²⁹ Poe: A Critical Study, pp. 202-203.

CHAPTER IV

ART AS A JOURNEY TOWARD ORDER

Although Edgar Allan Poe's works deal largely with the phenomenon of chaos, disorder, and the abyss motif present in man's external environment, nature, and in man's internal psychological composition, the imp of the perverse, Poe was not satisfied with the depictions of man as hopelessly lost in a chaotic, disordered universe. Poe was, after all, an artist, and as an artist he tried to create order from disorder, beauty from ugliness, and meaning from absurdity. In short, Poe, as an artist, quite naturally attempted to make art satisfy his demands for order and meaning in a tenuously constructed universe.

It has often been observed that Poe can be quite properly considered as one of the precursors of the latter nineteenth century's "art for art's sake" school of aesthetics. In 1925 George Moore published a volume of selected poetry entitled An Anthology of Pure Poetry, a book that included poems from various poets who had met the criteria which Moore established for pure poetry. In his introduction to the volume Moore defined "pure poetry" or "pure art" as "a vision

almost detached from the personality of the poet."¹ Moore stated that this detached, objective, aesthetic vision is actually what constitutes the often misunderstood aesthetic doctrine of "art for art's sake."² Moore's anthology and definition of pure poetry are particularly noteworthy because he saw fit to include six of Edgar Allan Poe's poems in his anthology. According to Moore, Poe "wrote certainly out of an emotive imagination; his poems are almost free from thought . . . ;"³ therefore, Poe must be seen as one of the early major figures in the development of pure poetry, pure art, or "art for art's sake" aesthetics.

Moore's analysis that Poe's poetry is "almost free from thought" is especially startling to the reader of Poe's tales who sees an almost proto-modern, proto-existentialist commitment to the ideas of disorder, chaos, the abyss, and man's moral wilderness. The reader is forced to account for the apparent dichotomy between Poe's tales which are loaded with meaningful symbols of destruction and philosophical excursions into the meaning of man's tentative existence and Poe's poems, which, according to Moore, are free from thought and are "meaningless" in the usual sense of the word. Moore is not alone in his analysis of Poe's aesthetic doctrine of "l'art pour l'art." In 1945 Malcolm Cowley noted that Poe "stands

¹ An Anthology of Pure Poetry, ed. George Moore (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925), p. 19.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 43.

at the exact beginning of the doctrine of art for art's sake. . . ."4 In an introduction to The Centenary Poe Montagu Slater stated that "Poe, if anybody, was the first apostle of art for art's sake. . . ."5 George Kelly, in an article of 1956, described how Poe formulated a "dogma of pure aestheticism and in doing so became one of the founders of a literary movement."6 In 1960 Lionel W. Wyld investigated Poe's aesthetics and found that Poe tried to strike a compromise between the subjectivity required of personal poetry and the objectivity required of "l'art pour l'art."7

It is clear then that at least some tentative connections have been made between Poe's aesthetics and the later development of the "art for art's sake" doctrines. Most of the critics who made these connections usually confined themselves to a study of Poe as a literary theorist, that is, Poe as studied in light of what he wrote in The Poetic Principle, especially in regard to what he wrote about didacticism and art:

I allude to the heresy of The Didactic. It has been assumed, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said,

4 Malcolm Cowley, "Aidgarpo," New Republic, 113(1945), 607-610.

5 The Centenary Poe, ed. Montagu Slater (London: The Bodley Head, 1949), p. 36.

6 George Kelly, "Poe's Theory of Beauty," American Literature, 27(1956), 521-536.

7 Lionel D. Wyld, "The Enigma of Poe: Reality vs. 'L'Art Pour L'Art,'" Lock Haven Bulletin, 2(1960), 34-38.

should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. We Americans especially have patronized this happy idea; and we Bostonians, very especially, have developed it in full. We have taken it in our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true Poetic dignity and force:--but the simple fact is, that, would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified--more supremely noble than this very poem--this poem per se--this poem which is a poem and nothing more--this poem written solely for the poem's sake.⁸

Although this quotation from The Poetic Principle goes far in explaining why some critics have linked Poe's commitment to art with the art for art's sake aesthetic, it does not indicate why Poe dedicated himself to art in a fashion resembling pure aestheticism. The critics and literary historians are strangely silent on this point too. It is only when Poe's work as a whole is considered that Poe's aestheticism begins to be understood in terms of what he has to say in his tales. When one considers the nature of reality as depicted in Poe's tales, that is, the nature of so-called natural laws, and the nature of man's own chaotic mind, Poe's attempts to create a pure aestheticism begin to make sense. Poe's proto-"art for art's sake" aesthetic originated as an aesthetic response, rather than a moral response, to the nature of reality as Poe saw it; Poe naturally turned to the hoped for purity and order

⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, The Poetic Principle, Introduction to Poe: A Thematic Reader, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1967), p. 456.

of pure aestheticism as a response to the chaos and disorder of a world gone mad. Whereas some writers turn to religion when faced with the prospect of finitude and the abyss of disorder, Poe turned to art in search of order and redemption.

As demonstrated by his tales with their accumulation of effects, moods, and key words, and the emphasis upon the abyss motif, Poe's view of reality might best be described as proto-existentialist. Poe is, as Laura Hofrichter has noted, in that nineteenth-century line of literary development which included artists who, "no longer are able to rely fully on the old world [and values], and yet disliking the new and coming changes to the point of ignoring them, . . . created a world of their own."⁹ Poe, of course, in his treatment of nature and his depiction of the perverse tendencies of the human mind, depicted a world imbued with "the spirit of destruction . . . a world of functions and reactions only, a world without substance and human beings without individuality, an absurd world and essentially a non-human one,"¹⁰ that is, a world inimical to man where madmen are the rule, and absurdity is not the exception but the essence of reality.¹¹

Because Poe viewed reality as a constantly changing, transient, inharmonious, often absurd and meaningless,

⁹ Laura Hofrichter, "From Poe to Kafka," University of Toronto Quarterly, 29(1960), 405-419.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Edward Stone, "Poe In and Out of His Time," ESQ, 2(1963), 14-17.

incoherent, and dangerous framework, he aesthetically rather than morally, responded to the incoherence of an existential world with the coherence and harmony which he envisioned and spoke of as "the Beauty above"¹² and "supernal Beauty" beyond the disintegrating influences of a sublunary, non-moral world. In other words, Poe became an apostle of beauty for beauty's sake and a priest of the inviolability of the "poem per se" which, "by elevating the soul" of man, gave man a brief glimpse of beauty and aesthetic happiness. Poe turned to art with a religious fervor, hoping to order the disordered. Poe was vigorous in his attempts to establish art as separate from and above the chaos of reality. Because of his view of reality as chaos, Poe, and later Baudelaire, took pains to assure that "poetry cannot, under penalty of death or failure, be assimilated to science or morality; it does not have truth as its object, it has only itself."¹³ Thus Poe actively sought to separate art from life so that art, or the redemptive possibilities of the "supernal Beauty" in art, would not become contaminated by association with the abysmal conditions of a so-called moral world.

Just as Poe's tales establish the basis of his conception of reality, Poe's poetry establishes his quest for the supernal beauty of art. At least one critic has suggested

¹² The Poetic Principle, p. 457.

¹³ Charles Baudelaire, "New Notes on Edgar Poe," The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism Since 1829, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1966), pp. 43-60.

that when Poe, in his poetry, pursued beauty for beauty's sake and art for art's sake, he was actually engaged upon a "quest for being and permanence"¹⁴ in a world which offered neither:

the quest for the absolute--for identity, self, being, as opposed to death or nothingness symbolized by the Raven--constitutes the principle theme of Poe's poetry. The vision of beauty can be gained through the cultivation of taste, the soul acting as the agent that performs the specific role of aesthetic discrimination.¹⁵

In other words, Poe's quest for beauty was not a self-indulgent quest for trivial aesthetic thrills or an aesthetic escapism, but was instead a quest for aesthetic salvation. Poe, however, knew that if aesthetic salvation were possible at all, beauty and art, especially poetry, must disassociate themselves from the meaningless and useless preaching of those sublunary "truths" so often occurring in nineteenth-century didactic poetry. Poe believed that such truths, like so-called "natural laws," were poised upon the brink of destruction, and if beauty and art were associated with these didactic truths, they too would perish when the maelstrom of absurdity finally engulfs reality. Poe, in his poetry, for the most part yearned for truths not subject to disintegration, and he fixed his yearnings upon the axis of supernal beauty. "Art for art's sake" was a device Poe employed in order to protect the inviolability of art and beauty.

¹⁴ E. San Juan, Jr., "The Form of Experience in the Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe," Georgia Review, 21(1967), 65-80.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 68.

Examples of Poe's yearnings for the stability provided by supernal beauty are not hard to find in Poe's poetry. In The Poetic Principle Poe likened the yearning of man for supernal beauty to "the desire of the moth for the star."¹⁶ In the poems "Evening Star" and "Al Aaraff" Poe employs this star-imagery to suggest the distance and inviolability of beauty:

'Twas noontide of summer,
 And midtime of night,
 And stars, in their orbits,
 Shone pale, through the light
 Of the brighter, cold moon.
 'Mid planets her slaves,
 Herself in the Heavens,
 Her beam on the waves.

I gazed awhile
 On her cold smile;
 Too cold--too cold for me--
 There passed, as a shroud,
 A fleecy cloud,
 And I turned away to thee,
 Proud Evening Star,
 In thy glory afar
 And dearer thy beam shall be;
 For joy to my heart
 Is the proud part
 Thou bearest in Heaven at night,
 And more I admire
 Thy distant fire,
 Than that colder, lowly light.¹⁷

In this poem, "Evening Star," the "desire of the moth for the star" is obvious. The narrator prefers the "distant fire" of a more beautiful reality to the "colder, lowly light" of

¹⁶ An Introduction to Poe, p. 457.

¹⁷ Complete Tales, p. 1018.

sublunary truths. In his poem "Al Aaraaf," Poe attempted to define his conception of beauty and aesthetic purity which he longed for in "Evening Star." According to Floyd Stovall, Poe, in "Al Aaraaf," consciously tried to metaphorically depict his ideas about supernal beauty.¹⁸ By carefully reading "Al Aaraaf" the reader can receive some idea of how Poe expected his aestheticism to function: ". . . the star Al Aaraaf is the realm of beauty, and the spirits who dwell there are artists, lovers of beauty, whose duty it is to reveal to men the true nature of God."¹⁹ The idea that artists are "lovers of beauty" who reveal the "nature of God" or supernal beauty to men demonstrates how Poe expected his aestheticism to function. Poe's worship of beauty for beauty's sake and doctrine of art for art's sake ("the poem per se") actually is an aesthetically circuitous route which might be paraphrased as "art for art's sake for man's sake." That is, the artist must not devote himself to morality or man's ideas of morality; the artist must instead devote himself completely to art and to beauty because in doing this he actually acts as a go-between or link between God and man. The poet's duty then is to "arrange the forms of terrestrial beauty in a semblance of the celestial pattern [supernal

¹⁸ Floyd Stovall, Edgar Poe the Poet: Essays New and Old On the Man and His Work (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1969), p. 116.

¹⁹ Ibid.

beauty], in the contemplation of which man's soul is exalted to ecstasy and made one with the divine."²⁰

The artist, by devoting himself to the ideal, art or beauty, in an art for art's sake way is able to bring some of the unalloyed supernal beauty into the range of man's soul and an "elevation of the soul" results. But if the artist should attempt to compromise the inviolate state of pure beauty or pure art by mixing in lessons or "truths," the artist has perverted the essence of pure beauty and committed the "heresy of the didactic" because "this sense of the beautiful has nothing to do with the passions of mankind . . . [and] the story of Angelo and Ianthe [in 'Al Aaraaf'] is an illustration of how the passion of [sublunary] love may cause the ruin of artist [and art] by distracting them from their proper work, the creation and dissemination of beauty."²¹ Poe then is one of the first artists to advocate a kind of aesthetic salvation for man. He "sought to find ways of creating symbolism that would do duty in the stead of an earlier more unified vision of the world"²² which had disintegrated along with so-called natural laws and the goodness of conscience into absurdity.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 119.

²¹ Ibid., p. 120.

²² Paul Ramsey, Jr., "Poe and Modern Art," College Art Journal, 18(1959), 210-215.

In his poetry, Poe's depiction of beauty not only took the dispassionate forms of "Evening Star" and "Al Aaraaf" but also it took the form of the idealized woman who is somehow, like a star, above and beyond sublunary reality and therefore capable of elevating man's soul, at least for a few moments, into the realms of pure beauty. Poe's "To Helen" amply illustrates this idea:

Helen, thy beauty is to me
 Like those Nicean barks of yore,
 That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
 The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
 To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,
 Thy Hycacinth hair, thy classic face,
 Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
 To the glory that was Greece
 And the grandeur that was Rome.

Lo! in you brilliant window-niche
 How statue-like I see thee stand!
 The agate lamp within thy hand,
 Ah! Psyche, from the regions which
 Are Holy Land! ²³

Just as Poe attempted to secure the inviolability of art so that art could depict the essence of supernal beauty, he also attempted in his poem to secure the inviolability of woman who, like art, could elevate man's soul above the chaos of reality. Idealized woman, for Poe, was an expression of supernal beauty. As one critic has noted, "To Helen" well "illustrates the power of beauty to unify and control the diverse faculties of the poet."²⁴ Similar idealized women,

²³ Complete Tales, p. 1017.

²⁴ Stovall, p. 178.

or supernal beauty personified, form the nucleus of such poems as "Lenore," whom the narrator compares to a "golden bowl,"²⁵ "Eulalie--A Song," ("Ah, less--less bright/The stars of night/ Than the eyes of the radiant girl!"²⁶), and "For Annie," ("But my heart is brighter/Than all of the many/Stars in the sky,/For it sparkles with Annie--"²⁷). Poe so much associated idealized woman with the concept of supernal beauty that he claimed that the most poetical subject for a pure poem is the death of a beautiful woman.²⁸

Because Poe was especially concerned with the idea of supernal beauty and pure aestheticism in the composition of the "poem per se," he could make something as chaotic as death seem extremely stable and ordered:

No rays from the holy Heaven come down
 On the long night-time of that town;
 But light from out the lurid sea
 Streams up the turrets silently--
 Gleams up the pinnacles far free--
 Up domes--up spires--up kingly halls--
 Up fanes--up Babylon-like walls--
 Up shadowy long-forgotten bowers
 Of sculptured ivy and stone flowers--
 Up many and many a marvellous shrine
 Whose wreathed friezes intertwine
 The viol, the violet, and the vine.
 Resignedly beneath the sky
 The melancholy waters lie.
 So blend the turrets and shadows there
 That all seem pendulous in air,
 While from a proud tower in the town
 Death looks gigantically down.²⁹

²⁵ Complete Tales, p. 946.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 969.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 972.

²⁸ The Poetic Principle, p. 446.

²⁹ Complete Tales, p. 963.

It is through the art of such poems that Poe hoped to elevate the souls of readers and enable them to experience another realm of experience, an aesthetic, orderly experience, derived from an excitation of soul from the contemplation of supernal beauty. It is, however, not to Poe's poems, but to two of his tales that one must turn in order to learn how Poe felt that pure and ordered aestheticism could indirectly save men from the chaos around them and the chaos within them.

In Poe's tale "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," a tale centered around the dialogue between two lovers after death has occurred, Monos reminisces about life on earth and how life on earth had been perverted by "the term 'improvement,' as applied to the progress of our civilization."³⁰ After describing the chaotic, "diseased commotion, moral and physical"³¹ resulting from science, industrialism, and "omniprevalent Democracy," Monos makes the statement that man still could have saved himself if he had been willing to cultivate "taste," that is, art and beauty,

for, in truth, it was at this crisis that taste alone--that faculty which, holding a middle position between the pure intellect and the moral sense, could never safely have been disregarded--it was not that taste alone could have led us gently back to Beauty, to Nature, and to Life.³²

30 Complete Tales, pp. 444-451.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

It is in this statement that the reader can begin to understand why Poe placed so much emphasis on supernal beauty, and an art free from didacticism and "truths." Poe's pure aestheticism had, as its object, the salvation of man.³³ It seems clear that Poe had an idea that an aestheticism, concerned not with the intellect but with beauty, could indeed act as an aesthetic force for harmony in the face of disharmony. Poe makes a similar statement in The Poetic Principle when he writes that "taste contents herself with displaying the charms:--waging war upon Vice solely on the ground of her deformity--her disposition--her animosity to the fitting, to the appropriate, to the harmonious--in a word, to Beauty."³⁴ Art, then, Poe felt, could overwhelm ugliness with beauty.

Poe's most complete treatment of aestheticism as salvation appears in his story "The Domain of Arnheim." In this tale the narrator relates how a wealthy friend of his gratified his "thirst for beauty"³⁵ by aesthetically creating a lavish landscape-garden, using his creative instincts to fulfill the promise of supernal beauty inherent in God's world. The story is especially important because Ellison,

³³ Robert D. Jacobs, "Poe's Earthly Paradise," American Quarterly, 12(1960), 404-413.

³⁴ The Poetic Principle, p. 457.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 317.

the wealthy creator, "is one of Poe's few blissful creatures,"³⁶ that is, one of the few of Poe's characters who achieve happiness on earth. This achievement is important when one reads the tale in light of Poe's professed aestheticism. Ellison is able to achieve happiness not through moral or religious means but through aesthetic means: "thus Poe implies . . . that man [through art] can create a paradisaical landscape of beauty and live in 'bliss' with full aesthetic enjoyment . . . ,"³⁷ but man can only do this; that is, can only come close to salvation however brief the experience, through a pure art, an art which is devoted to the elevation of man's soul through supernal beauty. Poe, then, in "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" implies that man can save himself through art, but in "The Domain of Arnheim," Poe "gives us an example of the way that taste can save us."³⁸ Ellison seems to reflect Poe's own view that other than the possibility of an aesthetic salvation, one could put little faith in the scientific or intellectual "possibility of any improvement . . . being effected by man himself in the general condition of man. . . ."³⁹ Poe believed that "the artist, being neither

³⁶ American Quarterly, 404-413.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 407.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 409.

³⁹ The Poetic Principle, p. 312.

divine in his creativity nor Satanic in his powers of destruction, could be, in one sense, the savior of mankind. He could not fully communicate the supernal truth and beauty of his intuitive vision, but he could give happiness and fulfillment by lending form and expression to the inchoate stuff, the raw material nature furnishes. . . ."⁴⁰

It is this belief, this purely aesthetic response to the chaos of reality, which one must keep in mind when trying to understand why Poe was so much concerned with the inviolability of art as an expression of pure, supernal beauty. Poe's own "art for art's sake" doctrine actually becomes, upon a close examination of his tales and his poetry as well as his principles of poetry, an "art for art's for man's sake," an aestheticism which, in its very purity, could remain apart from the sublunary chaos of man's external and internal environment. Poe dedicated himself to art, pure art, a force for order, so that the disorder of reality could somehow be overcome if only for a brief, ecstatic moment.

⁴⁰ American Quarterly, 413.

CHAPTER V

INTUITIVE RATIONALITY AS A JOURNEY TOWARD ORDER

The fact that works such as "The Domain of Arnheim" and "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" demonstrate Poe's attention to art and the artist as a response to disorder in the universe seems to suggest that Poe is one of those romantic artists who had an instinctive fear and distrust of scientific rationalism. Even in such an early poem as "Sonnet-- To Science" Poe, as a youthful, romantic poet, describes the dangers of science and rationalism to the poetic sensibility:

Science! true daughter of Old Time thou art!
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?
How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise?
Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering
To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,
Albeit he soared with the undaunted wing?
Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car?
And driven the Hamadryad from the wood
To seek a shelter in some happier star?
Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,
The Elfin from the green grass, and from me
The summer beneath the tamarind tree?¹

This poem would seem to complement Poe's emphasis upon the poetic sensibility in such works as "The Poetic Principle"

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, Inc., 1938), p. 992. All future reference to this text will hereafter be cited as Complete Tales.

in which Poe defined poetry as "the rhythmical creation of beauty."² The distrust of rationalism and materialism is clear, and yet neither it nor The Poetic Principle completely describes Poe's views of rationalism as a possible approach toward order in a disordered world. Poe was one romantic writer who gave rationalism and science its due. The sciences or pseudo-sciences of his day repeatedly appear in Poe's works; there is mesmerism in "Mesmeric Revelation" and "The Gold Bug," and there is phrenology sprinkled throughout Poe's works. But Poe's most thorough and most famous explorations of rationalism as a force for order appear in the genre of the detective-story or tales of ratiocination. It is here, and especially to the memorable and impressive figure of C. Auguste Dupin, that the reader must turn if he is to understand yet another way that Poe explored the boundaries of order and disorder.

Dupin, as Daniel Hoffman has pointed out, is one of those characters marked with a "dandiacal distinctiveness of mind which sets off the master ratiocinator from the hoi polloi. His interest may be in natural sciences, or in foreign languages, or in cryptographic problems, or in mathematical puzzles, or any such variety of arcana requiring both special information and unusual intellectual propen-

² Edgar Allan Poe, "The Poetic Principle," Introduction to Poe: A Thematic Reader, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1967), p. 458.

sities: Poe's version of the genius of the age."³ Poe's narrators who possess this "dandiacal distinctiveness of mind" all seek or explore some area of interest in order to resolve questions of the highest priority. In "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," for example, the narrator, "P", seeks to mesmerize M. Valdemar in order to forestall the disordering force of death, perhaps even to conquer death.⁴ In "Mesmeric Revelation," "P" goes one step farther and travels beyond death by mesmerizing Mr. Vankirk and quizzing him about the nature of the universe and God.⁵

When Poe created the genius of Dupin, he not only created a character schooled in one of the pseudo-scientific disciplines, such as mesmerism; but he also created an active, resolute genius. Dupin is Poe's vision of the "hero-god"⁶ who is out to tie up the loose ends of the universe, answer all unanswered questions, resolve those issues that need resolving, and make sense out of nonsense. Dupin is the epitome of Poe's version of the rationalistic process, and yet he is not the advocate of those "dull realities" of science described in "Sonnet--To Science." Dupin is the

³ Daniel Hoffman, Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe (New York: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 126-127.

⁴ Complete Tales, pp. 96-103.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 88-95.

⁶ Robert Daniel, "Poe's Detective God," Furioso, VI (1951), 45-52.

possessor of a mind that works by combining "intuition with mathematical exactitude."⁷ In other words, Dupin is Poe's fullest depiction of the ministering artist who offers salvation to a troubled world. If Poe only hinted at the possibilities of aesthetic salvation through aesthetic order in "The Domain of Arnheim" and "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," he fully depicts the minister of art and order in his three best tales of ratiocination: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter," and "The Mystery of Marie Roget." In these tales Dupin is depicted as an immortal aesthetic or intuitive god in the mortal dress of ratiocination, rationality, and logic.

Dupin's approach to order is anything but rational. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" Dupin's rational method is, as Edward H. Davidson has noted, "actually the grotesquerie of any rational system--. . . . The mind of Dupin began with the assumption that the world is in total disorder. His is the unproductive sterility of a mind which can solve every ethical problem by abts of unethical intuition. The Lockean world of sensation and reflection became mere impulse and the flight of the imagination."⁸ The fact that Dupin's mind takes it for granted that "the world is in total disorder" is extremely

⁷ Hoffman, p. 110.

⁸ Edward H. Davidson, Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 216.

important in understanding not only the mind of Dupin, but also the way in which Poe expected "intuitive rationality" to order this disordered world. Until he depicted the character of Dupin, most of Poe's characters, when confronted with the strange, the unusual, or the suspension of natural laws, were either overwhelmed with the confrontation--that is, swallowed by the abyss--or were stunned into a condition of mental stasis. Dupin, the "hero-god," the aesthetic rationalist, however, has a larger view of reality. He is able to separate, as he indicates in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the unusual from the abstruse; that is, the unusual or outré has a place in his view of reality. In fact, Dupin, in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," proclaims that it is by "deviations from the plane of the ordinary, that reason feels its way, if at all, in its search for the true."⁹ The whole case of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is made simple for Dupin because of the unusual occurrence of an orang-outang's murder and mutilation of two women. The police, in this instance, are similar to those other Poe characters whose minds are overwhelmed by the outré in the universe. Dupin, the intuitive rationalist, is able to make intuitive leaps from what should be to what is, from

⁹ Complete Tales, p. 154.

¹⁰ Ibid.

the image of Truth to Truth's very core. Similarly, in "The Mystery of Marie Roget" Dupin describes the role of chance and improbability in his world view:

the history of human knowledge has so uninterruptedly shown that to collateral, or incidental, or accidental events we are indebted for the most numerous and most valuable discoveries, that it has at length become necessary, in prospective view of improvement, to make not only large, but the largest allowances for inventions that shall arise by chance, and quite out of the range of ordinary expectation. It is no longer philosophical to base upon what has been a vision of what is to be. Accident is admitted as a portion of the substructure. We make chance a matter of absolute calculation. We subject the unlooked for and the unimagined to the mathematical formulae of the schools.¹¹

Dupin, like an artist, rules nothing out in his view of reality; even the most improbable occurrence has its place in the scheme of things. Dupin is the mediator between the probable and improbable, the real and the imagined, reality and the ideal. For Dupin,

a crime is a disruption of the ostensible order of things--their temporal and physical relationships in which man puts his trust--and is, therefore, a glimpse into ideality, into the very nature of things. It is an instance . . . [where] the detective-philosopher sees the total relevancy not only of being but of non-being; he can begin to relate the irrelevant, the seemingly meaningless action in the brute world to the total primal calculus of relationship which can be apprehended only by the creative imagination. The man who solves a crime is a poet: he is a recreator of things as they truly are, not as they seem 'in reality' to the common gaze.¹²

¹¹ Ibid., p. 191.

¹² Poe: A Critical Study, pp. 217-218.

The fact that Dupin, the solver of crimes is a poet, is indicated in the tale "The Purloined Letter." In this tale Dupin recovers an incriminating purloined letter from under the nose of the Minister D____. Dupin's method is to identify his own intellect with that of D____ who, besides being a politician involved in intrigue, is a poet. Dupin himself confesses to the Prefect G____ that he has himself "been guilty of certain doggerel;"¹³ therefore, it is natural for him to identify with the mind of D____ while the Prefect, a down-to-earth bureaucrat, regards a poet as "one remove from a fool."¹⁴ It is not the unimaginative, bureaucratic perserverance of the prefect that recovers the letter, it is the imaginative, intuitive, poetic sense of Dupin that solves the case. Whereas a man such as the prefect might employ some mathematical or scientific principles of reasoning to solve the case, Dupin displays his own intuitive side by scorning mathematical reasoning:

I dispute . . . the reason educed by mathematical study. The mathematics are the science of form and quantity; mathematical reasoning is merely logic applied to observation upon form and quantity. The great error lies in supposing that even the truths of what is called pure algebra are abstract or general truths. And this error is so egregious that I am confounded at the universality with which it has been received. Mathematical axioms are not axioms of general truth. What is true of relation--of form and quantity--is often grossly false in regard to morals, for example. . . . But the mathematician argues from his finite truths, through habit, as if they were of an absolutely general applica-

¹³ Complete Tales, p. 211.

¹⁴ Ibid.

bility--as the world indeed imagines them to be. Bryant, in his very learned 'Mythology,' mentions an analogous source of error, when he says that 'Although the pagan fables are not believed, yet we forget ourselves continually, and make inferences from them as existing realities.' With the algebraists, however, who are pagans themselves, the 'pagan fables' are believed and the inferences are made, not so much through lapse of memory as through an unaccountable addling of the brains. In short, I never yet encountered the mere mathematician who would be trusted out of equal roots, or one who did not clandestinely hold it as a point of his faith that $x^2 px$ was absolutely and unconditionally equal to q . Say to one of these gentlemen, by way of experiment, if you please, that you believe occasions may occur where $x^2 px$ is not altogether equal to q , and having made him understand what you mean, get out of his reach as speedily as convenient, for beyond doubt, he will endeavor to knock you down.¹⁵

The kinship of Dupin's mind with the mind of an artist is further strengthened by the depiction of Dupin as the man alone, the bulwark of order in a disordered world. Like the artist, Dupin is a man apart from society. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," for example, he is described by the narrator as a "young gentleman" of "an excellent, indeed illustrious family, but, by a variety of untoward events, had been reduced to such poverty that the energy of his character succumbed beneath it, and he ceased to bestir himself in the world, or to care for the retrieval of his fortunes."¹⁶ It is interesting to note that the resolute genius lives in "a time-eaten and grotesque mansion . . . in a retired and desolate portion of the Faubourg St. Germain" and that both Dupin and the narrator live in a secluded part.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 217.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 143.

of Paris existing "within ourselves alone."¹⁷ Similarly in "The Mystery of Marie Roget" both the narrator and Dupin exist apart from the world, having given "the Future to the winds, and slumbered tranquilly in the Present, weaving the dull world around us into dreams."¹⁸ As Davidson notes, Dupin is the hero-artist who

belongs to the people and yet he must make his great decisions or undergo the major trial in the waste places or in the solitude of the anguished soul. He is one of us; yet he must, to express himself, go above, away from, or beyond our commoner range of experience in order to bring his message, the fire from heaven, the solution to the crime. This is the Dupin who figures in the three memorable stories in which he is the hero-god: he reverses the clock and lives vividly while the rest of the world sleeps; he is outside the range of society, and yet he can solve the greatest mysteries in society."¹⁹

From his vantage point apart from the world, Dupin is able to approach the framework of reality as a kind of "secular god."²⁰ Even the language of the Dupin tales is concerned with the miracles that Dupin works upon society.²¹ In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," for example, the narrator notes Dupin's apparent ability to read minds, "'Dupin,' said I, gravely, 'this is beyond my comprehension. I do not hesitate to say that I am amazed, and can scarcely credit my senses.'"²² Dupin seems to be able almost to exert his

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 170.

19 Poe: A Critical Study, p. 214.

20 Robert Daniel, pp. 45-52.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

creative will upon the chaos of reality and order the disordered, and, as Davidson has noted, this is the mark of an artist.²³

Because Dupin is an artist--that is, the resolute genius who solves crime--much as the artist writes a poem, it should not be surprising to the reader who is familiar with Poe's attitudes toward the possibilities of aesthetic salvation to find that Dupin is a savior figure in the tales of ratiocination. Dupin's talents, after all, even though he is separate from society, "expose him to the risk of being sacrificed for the welfare of the herd, whom he patronizes."²⁴ It is interesting to note that Dupin not only "patronizes" society as a servant or savior of that society's order, but he also "patronizes" society in the pejorative sense of the word. Dupin does not utilize his talents because he wants to right wrongs or aid society's idea of justice; Dupin, as an artist, an artist for the sake of being an artist, seeks to solve crimes solely for his own hedonistic amusement. As Davidson has noted, Dupin is "a man of intellect for whom other men's problems are matters of mere and momentary amusement; apart from the amusement, the struggle and the solution are not worth the bother; Dupin is excused from any moral intention. He has thereby turned the ethic of success into pure hedonism: the mind alone can enjoy its

²³ Poe: A Critical Study, p. 221.

²⁴ Robert Daniel, pp. 45-52.

own operations. . . . He is the ultimate dream of the artist who has nothing more to do but enjoy his art."²⁵ In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," for example, Dupin gives as his primary motive for entering the case, amusement, and, only secondarily, as a returned favor, "'As for these murders, let us enter into some examinations for ourselves, before we make up an opinion respecting them. An inquiry will afford us amusement . . . and besides, LeBon once rendered me a service for which I am not ungrateful'."²⁶ Similarly, in "The Purloined Letter," Dupin enters the case, not to see that justice is done, but for the fifty-thousand francs offered by the prefect, and for the chance of revenge upon D___ who once did him "an evil turn" which he "good-humoredly" promised to remember.²⁷ Dupin then is a resolute genius, a poet who solves crimes, who is separated from society not only physically, in a secluded section of Paris, but also morally. He does not act for the reasons that other men act because he does not view reality as other men view it. The Faubourg St. Germain mansion of Dupin may as well be on Mt. Olympus with Dupin as the artist-god viewing all things in and out of the mortal perimeters of reality; for Dupin may or may not set things in order de-

²⁵ Poe: A Critical Study, p. 216.

²⁶ Complete Tales, p. 153.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 222.

pending upon whether or not he wishes to exercise his creative will, the artist's "intuitive-rationality," that is, imagination.

It seems clear, then, that Poe equated the intuitive rationalistic abilities of a man such as Dupin with the ability to perceive truths which an artist must possess. In this way Poe hoped that the intuitive rationalistic individual hero-god could reorder a disordered universe. Poe's tales of ratiocination illustrate his attempts to chart an intuitive course toward order for the aesthetic voyager such as Dupin.

CHAPTER VI

APOCALYPTIC JOURNEY TOWARD ORDER

Although Edgar Allan Poe explored the possibilities for order in the concepts of "intuitive rationality" and "aesthetic salvation," the predominance of the abyss motif in his tales and poems suggests that he was never finally convinced that the disordered universe could be reordered through intuition or art. In 1848, however, Poe transformed what had been a general exploration of disorder into a metaphysics of disorder; in short, Poe proclaimed to the world his vision of what constitutes order and what constitutes disorder, and he appropriately titled his proclamation Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe.

Just as his title states, Poe, a man who felt that singleness of effect was a key to artistic success and a man who had usually confined his choice of subject matter to the death of a beautiful woman, chose as his subject matter the universe itself. As Edward H. Davidson has noted in his excellent analysis of Eureka, Poe's essay "is concerned with three scientific problems relating to the physical universe: first, the concept of creation (or, how did matter become what appears to be?); second, the nature of matter (or, what and how is the observed physical universe energized?); and third, the prospect for the natural world (or, toward what

end is the ever-changing universe moving?)."¹ While the title of Poe's metaphysical proclamation indicates that Poe chose the prose "essay" as his medium for revealing the secrets of the spiritual and material universe, and while the work as a whole appears to follow the lines of a scientific treatise, Poe cautions the reader in his preface that his work is presented not to the scientist but "to the few who love me and whom I love . . . to the dreamers and those who put faith in dreams as in the only realities . . .," and that the work should be read not as a treatise but as "an art-product alone:--let us say as a Romance, or, if I be not urging too lofty a claim, as a Poem."² Similarly, in Eureka itself, Poe praises Kepler's discoveries because Kepler was more the artist than the logician and Kepler "guesses" or "imagined" or intuited his "vital laws."³ Poe, then, in Eureka, much as Dupin does in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," embraces intuition as his method of approaching the universe's secrets. It is in this intuitive method of exploring the universe that Poe remains the artist rather than the scientist in Eureka, and Eureka becomes the poem rather than the treatise.

¹ Edward H. Davidson, Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 224.

² Edgar Allan Poe, Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe, Introduction to Poe: A Thematic Reader, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1967), p. 550.

³ Poe: A Critical Study, p. 224.

In Eureka, then, Poe once more assumes the intuitive mask of a cosmic Monsieur Dupin and defines order and disorder in the universe. First, Poe defines what is not only the "general proposition" of his Eureka but also the general proposition of the universe, that is, "In the original unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation."⁴ This "proposition," which begins Poe's lengthy discourse, is a key to understanding Poe's metaphysics of apocalypse. It is interesting to note the phrases "original unity" and "inevitable Annihilation" because Poe here sets the perimeters of his philosophical inquiry; that is, the universe is that which is sandwiched between an original or primal unity and an inevitable end. Already Poe has departed from the tentative response of the artist toward disorder; he admits that disorder is the inevitable end of the universe and that the universe itself has sprung from a primal unity, a oneness which can only be God. Poe describes the constitution of the universe as a "forcing [of] the originally and therefore normally One into the abnormal condition of Many. An action of this character implies reaction. A diffusion from Unity, under the conditions, involves a tendency to return to Unity--a tendency ineradicable until satisfied."⁵ For Poe,

⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe, The Works of Edgar Allan Poe (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1849), III, 132.

⁵ Poe, p. 153.

then, the universe is the product of a diffusion from an original unity, and the "inevitable annihilation" that must end the universe will come about as the result of the "Many" returning to the "One" or the primal unity that preceded the diffusion. It was this diffusion that created the universe, and it will take an end of diffusion, which is still going on, to end the universe and reunite the One. This expansion-contraction concept is extremely important to an understanding of not only Eureka, but also it is important to an understanding of Poe's apocalyptic tales, such as "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion," "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," Narrative of A. Gordon Pym, and "The Fall of the House of Usher."

Poe's description of an "ineradicable tendency" of diffused matter to return to the primal condition of One goes a long way, metaphysically speaking, in explaining some of the motives for destructive action in several of Poe's more puzzling protagonists. Arthur Gordon Pym, for example, appears to be acting without motive throughout his narrative as he experiences entombments, mutiny, cannibalism, treachery, and final apocalyptic confrontation at the South Pole. No explanation is ever given by Poe to explain Pym's motives for leaving home for almost certain destruction, and yet Pym appears to be guided by something within himself, something that leads him from one dangerous confrontation to another. Leslie A. Fiedler has stated that Pym is "in love with

death"⁶ and that in Poe's mind "the death-wish is always uppermost"⁷ as a motive for action. While Fiedler is speaking in psychoanalytical terms, self-destruction as a motive for action comes close to what Poe himself has defined and illustrated as "The Imp of the Perverse." But Poe in Eureka has stated metaphysically that all matter, having been created through a diffusion of the One into the abnormal Many, must, in the end, return to its starting point--that is, the One, by turning upon itself, as it were, and retracing the diffusive steps back toward the center of creation, the primal unity of the thought of God: "the Thought of God is to be understood as originating the Diffusion--as proceeding with it--as regulating it--and, finally, as being withdrawn from it upon its completion. Then commences Reaction . . .," and the Many cease to exist by becoming One; therefore, the universe ceases to exist.⁸ Poe's Eureka, then, is a metaphysics of apocalypse; things have a beginning and will have a definite end when the thought of God is withdrawn from the diffusive universe. It would seem, then that this apocalyptic definition of order and disorder might explain Pym's self-destructive motives and the Imp of the Perverse in some of Poe's other protagonists. Poe speaks of an "ineradicable

⁶ Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), p. 373.

⁷ Ibid., p. 399.

⁸ Eureka, p. 183.

tendency" of all matter to return to its primal state, and, for Poe, the primal state of the universe is nothingness from which the Many has sprung. The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym, then, could be read as an illustration of how this "ineradicable tendency" to return to nothingness in one young man's mind serves as the motive for leading him from a comfortable home to the literal end of the earth, the South Pole. Pym's trip is a return or the active fulfillment of an "ineradicable tendency" to return to his origins, that is, the primal nothingness that was and will be again. Edward H. Davidson notes that the movement in Pym is from the complex (or, in Poe's metaphysical terms, the "many") toward the simple (or the "One" in Poe's Eureka) and that

this movement toward simplicity and opaqueness is one of the curiosities of a book which, though it presumably deals with man's enlarging consciousness and with the steadily maturing effect a knowledge of the world has on an impressionable mind, the farther it moves the more it tends to reduce external objects and events to their simplest forms.⁹

This movement is characterized by the elemental distinctions "between white [of the sea, the polar bear, the sky] and black [the natives, the terrain], between the good and the bad, between, in short, the varieties of comprehension which Pym has."¹⁰ The final confrontation with nothingness or reduction of the complex to the simple or ultimate nothingness takes place in Pym as "there arose in our pathway a shrouded

⁹ Poe: A Critical Study, p. 173.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 174.

human figure, very far larger in proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of snow."¹¹ The world, here, has finally been reduced to one color, white, and Pym "like the primal order of matter itself, was reduced to a blinding One--or chaos. There was no word or term which could further report the vision of nothing"¹² other than "whiteness!"

Pym, then, in actively seeking his annihilation, is representative of a complex, sentient particle of the universe which must follow its "ineradicable tendency" to return to the "One" or the primordial nothingness of Eureka. Psychologically speaking, as Fiedler noted, Pym suffers from a death-wish, but, metaphysically speaking, as Poe notes in the "general proposition" of Eureka, Pym has within himself the "germ" of his "Inevitable Annihilation". Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the section of Pym where Pym expresses "a longing to fall"¹³ from the face of a cliff: ". . . 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. . . ." ¹⁴ The term

¹¹ Edgar Allan Poe, Narrative of A. Gordon Pym, The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, Inc., 1938), p. 882. All future reference to this text will hereafter be cited as Complete Tales.

¹² Poe: A Critical Study, p. 175.

¹³ Complete Tales, p. 875.

¹⁴ Ibid.

"passion . . . uncontrollable" even parallels the term "tendency ineradicable" of the metaphysical Eureka. Daniel Hoffman has noted this parallel and attributed Pym's longing to that "of the organic to become inorganic, of the differential consciousness in the agony of its separateness to experience the frightening ecstasy of its reintegration into the unity from which it has been exiled. . .,"¹⁵ that is, the unity of the Many in the primordial One.¹⁶ Pym's voyage must be thought of, in light of Eureka, as a reduction of all the factors which have previously structured his life; that is, "Pym's chartless voyage is from an assumption that man lives by law and design, in his private life and in his society, to a realization that man lives only by illusion. . . ." ¹⁷ Pym's voyage is not a learning experience, but an unlearning experience; he unlearns what it means to be; he becomes less and less complex because he gets closer and closer to the universal starting point of nothingness. This metaphysical aspect of Pym perhaps explains why Pym seems so incomplete as a work of art. In a way, Pym proceeds from an ending to a beginning, the beginning of the universe, nothingness. Pym does not grow; he does not mature. He becomes simplified and the world around him becomes

¹⁵ Daniel Hoffmann, Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 273.

¹⁶ Eureka, p. 153.

¹⁷ Poe: A Critical Study, pp. 168-169.

simplified. Pym regresses

toward white, and toward blackness; toward such comforting, maternal images as the warm white water and the womblike vortex, and toward such frightening bogeys as the brutal black savages and the tomblike inhumation under the landslide they [the savages] contrived to kill the white explorers. He regresses in short, toward both dying and being reborn, toward the extinction of consciousness and the realization of a supraconsciousness in the moment of the self's annihilation.¹⁸

Pym then represents the Many returning to the One or the material world returning to nothingness. Ironically, as Hoffmann noted, this return is also a beginning as well as an ending, and this is the point around which Poe's apocalyptic metaphysics revolves. It is, after all, as Poe writes in Eureka, the perfect symmetry of universal apocalypse which is the origin of all order and disorder in the world. What has ended can be begun; what has begun can be ended,

on the Universal agglomeration and dissolution, we can readily conceive that a new and perhaps totally different series of conditions may ensue--another creation and irradiation, returning into itself--another action and reaction of the Divine Will. Guiding our imaginations by that omniprevalent law of laws, the law of periodicity, are we not, indeed, more than justified in entertaining a belief--let us say rather, in indulging a hope--that the processes we have here ventured to contemplate will be renewed forever, and forever, and forever; a novel Universe swelling into existence, and then subsiding into nothingness, at every throb of the Heart Divine?¹⁹

¹⁸ Hoffmann, p. 271.

¹⁹ Complete Tales, p. 256.

This phenomenon, then, is the only order of the universe for Poe: the symmetrical creation of an endless succession of universes all stemming from the One, that is, nothingness, and all growing into the Many, the individuated particles of the material world, and all returning to the beginning and ending of the unity of nothingness. Poe's metaphysics is based on the belief in a cycle of beginning and ending, of the creation and the destruction of what has been created. In this cycle of beginning/ending Poe saw order, order in disorder. He even compared the beginning and ending of the cycle of creation to the expansion and contraction of a divine heart pulsating with the flow of life and death, not only of man but of all matter.²⁰ Apocalypse is not an end, but an integral part of a beginning, a new beginning of a new universe. This expansion/contraction analogy is even illustrated in Poe's earlier tales of self-destruction. Daniel Hoffman has indicated that this impulse toward apocalyptic destruction is nothing more than a manifestation of the "Imp of the Perverse"--that is, the manifested behavior of Pym--and the protagonists of "The Black Cat," "William Wilson," and "The Tell-Tale Heart" is rooted first in "their Will, which individuates [creates] them through their ambitious or criminal acts, then by their Impulse [ineradicable tendency] which integrates them once more with the unity they all unwittingly seek [in nothingness]

20 Ibid.

as their Imp of the Perverse hurries them toward self-exposure and death."²¹ All of these "perverse" protagonists of Poe's have one thing in common: they seek the annihilation of self, and, in the metaphysical terms of Eureka, they seek to destroy the condition of individuation in order to reunite and reconstruct the One. These protagonists seek to lose the self in order to re-experience the Self, or the primal condition of Oneness. They seek order through disorder; they seek an end to chaos by cultivating chaos, physical or psychological, and by submitting to it. The self can no longer experience such things as guilt and pain if it is destroyed and reunited in the primordial condition of nothingness. What appears to be a force for disorder only in Poe's tales, that is, the desire for self-annihilation, is, in light of Poe's Eureka, a force for universal restructuring and order. Nowhere in Poe's fiction is this force better illustrated than in his masterpiece "The Fall of the House of Usher."

Again, as in Pym and other of Poe's tales, the puzzling question with regard to "The Fall of the House of Usher" is motive: what is it that motivates Roderick Usher to seal Madeline, his sister, living in a tomb, and what conclusions are to drawn from the frenzied, apocalyptic ending of "Usher"? Critics, such as Daniel Hoffman, have noted the parallels between the conclusion of "The Fall of the House Of Usher" and such a tale as "The Conversation of Eiros and Char-

²¹ Hoffmann, p. 293.

mion."²² In "The Fall of the House of Usher," for example, the narrator barely escapes the house as the figure of Madeline falls upon Roderick Usher:

from that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued; for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely discernible fissure . . . extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base.²³

This conclusion from "Usher" parallels that of "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" in which Eiros describes the apocalyptic ending of the world to Charmion: ". . . then, there came a shouting and pervading sound, as if from the mouth itself of HIM; while the whole incumbent mass of ether in which we existed, burst at once into a species of intense flame, for whose surpassing brilliancy and all-fervid heat even the angels in the high Heaven of Pure knowledge have no name. Thus ended all."²⁴ The "surpassing brilliancy" of the light in "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" and the "wild light" of "Usher" make it clear to the reader that the "last days" "prophecies of the Holy Book"²⁵, or the

²² Ibid., pp. 318-319.

²³ Complete Tales, p. 245.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 456.

²⁵ Ibid.

conditions of apocalypse, are present. The conclusions of both tales revolve around the idea inherent in the phrase "Thus ended all."

Similarly, as E. Arthur Robinson has noted, there are striking parallels between the apocalyptic tale "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" and "The Fall of the House of Usher":

despite differences in detail, the similarity between the experience of Monos and that of the Ushers is striking. In 'The Fall of the House of Usher' the various aspects of disintegration are divided among Roderick, the home of his forefathers, and his sister Madeline. In the 'Colloquy' essentially the same elements are combined in the experience of a single being who is threatened, as it seems to him, with final extinction: the persistent sentience, the heightened sensory activity, and the trancelike state which observers identify with death. Roderick does not suffer the transmutations of the senses that Monos undergoes, but like Monos he cannot organize his intensified impressions into customary patterns. Most significantly, Monos unites the sensory activity of Roderick with the deathlike condition of Madeline.²⁶

Because of the similarities between "The Fall of the House of Usher" and such apocalyptic illustrations as "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" and "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion," critics have naturally tended to link Poe's most detailed study of apocalypse, Eureka, with the puzzling disintegration of Roderick Usher's sanity. Unlike "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" and "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," "The Fall of the House of Usher" centers upon the mind of its protagonist Roderick Usher. Anyone familiar with the tale and with the poem "The Haunted Palace" within

²⁶ "Order and Sentience in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" PMLA, 76 (1961), 68-81.

the tale cannot fail to draw the necessary parallels between Usher's mind and the structure of the universe, and ultimately, the apocalyptic disintegration of the universe:

I.

In the greenest of our valleys,
 By good angels tenanted,
 Once a fair and stately palace--
 Radiant palace--reared its head.
 In the monarch Thought's dominion--
 It stood there!
 Never seraph spread a pinion
 Over fabric half so fair.

II.

Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
 On its roof did float and flow
 (This--all this--was in the olden
 Time long ago);
 And every gentle air that dallied,
 In that sweet day,
 Along the ramparts plumed and pallid,
 A winged odor went away.

III.

Wanderers in the happy valley
 Through two luminous windows saw
 Spirits moving musically
 To a lute's well-tuned law;
 Round about a throne, where sitting
 (Porphyrogene!)
 In state his glory well befitting,
 The ruler of the realm was seen.

IV.

And all with pearl and ruby glowing
 Was the fair palace door,
 Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing,
 And sparkling evermore,
 A troop of Echoes whose sweet duty
 Was but to sing,
 In voices of surpassing beauty,
 The wit and wisdom of their king.

V.

But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
 Assailed the monarch's high estate;
 (Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow
 Shall dawn upon him, desolate!)
 And, round about his home, the glory
 That blushed and bloomed
 Is but a dim-remembered story
 Of the old time entombed.

VI.

And travellers now within that valley
 Through the red-litten windows see
 Vast forms that move fantastically
 To a discordant melody;
 While, like a rapid ghastly river,
 Through the pale door;
 A hideous throng rush out forever,
 And laugh--but smile no more.²⁷

The analogy between Usher's head and the palace's "reared head" is obvious, but it is also noteworthy that Poe chose to describe the functioning of sanity and an orderly universe as "Spirits moving musically/To a lute's well-tuned law" because Poe chose to preface his tale with a similar image from DeBeranger: "son coeur est un luth suspendu;/ Sitot qu'on le touche il resonance."²⁸ It is possible that Roderick Usher's heart, which is comparable to a sensitive, suspended lute, is also comparable to the "Divine Heart" which Poe expounds upon in Eureka²⁹ that expands and contracts to begin and end the many-particled universe. At least one critic, Maurice Beebe, has read Eureka and "The

²⁷ Complete Tales, pp. 238-239.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

²⁹ Complete Tales, p. 256.

"Fall of the House of Usher" along such lines. According to Beebe, Roderick Usher is one particle of a many-particled universe who takes it upon himself to end what has begun, that is, the process of diffusion and radiation of the One into the Many:

Roderick is apparently a deterioration of his ancestors, and the presence of the narrator implies that Roderick was stronger in the past than in the present. When he can no longer stand to be a tense, suffering creature, attracting and repulsing, attracted and repulsed, he seeks a return to the unity of no attraction-repulsion, no-matter, nothingness. . . . By burying his sister alive, Roderick tries to halt the diffusion. The totality symbolically presented in his picture of Madeline's vault implies, in a sense, the completion of expansion, the attempt to become independent of the diffused portion of himself by isolating. . . . Godlike Roderick's action is the peak of the self-diffusion, the beginning of a return to a concentrated Oneness, which, . . . is nothingness and annihilation.³⁰

Usher, then, appears to be one more of Poe's long line of protagonists who seek unity or order, in terms described in Eureka, through an "ineradicable tendency" (or, in Poe's fictional phrasing, "The Imp of the Perverse") to commit acts which eventually and inevitably lead to self-annihilation and the order of nothingness.

E. Arthur Robinson in his analysis of "The Fall of the House of Usher" reaches similar conclusions. Robinson notes the importance of Roderick Usher's idea of sentience to the meaning of Poe's tale and its metaphysical appearance in

³⁰ "The Universe of Roderick Usher," Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 130.

Poe's Eureka.³¹ Usher, in "The Fall of the House of Usher," speaks in terms almost identical to those used by Poe in Eureka when he discussed the "sentience" of inorganic matter: in "Usher" the narrator claims to describe Usher's theory of sentience because of its "novelty":

this opinion, in its general form, was that of the sentience of all vegetable things. But in his disordered fancy, the idea had assumed a more daring character, and trespassed, under certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization. . . . The belief, however, was connected (as I have previously hinted) with the gray stones of the home of his forefathers. The conditions of the sentence had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones--in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many fungi which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around. . . . Its evidence--the evidence of the sentience--was to be seen, he said (and I here started as he spoke), in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him--what he was. Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none.³²

While the narrator of "Usher" obviously disdains to comment upon what to him appears to be a ludicrous notion, it is, according to Robinson, Poe himself in Eureka who elaborates upon the notion of "sentience" which plays so prominent a role in "Usher":

all these creatures--all--those whom you term animate, as well as those to which you deny life for no better reason than that you do not behold it in operation--all these creatures have, in a greater or

³¹ E. Arthur Robinson, "Order and Sentience in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" PMLA, 76 (1961), 68-81.

³² Complete Tales, p. 239.

lesser degree, a capacity for pleasure and for pain. . . . These creatures are all, too, more or less, and more or less obviously, conscious Intelligences; conscious, first, of a proper identity; conscious, secondly, and by faint indeterminate glimpses, of an identity with the Divine Being of whom we speak--of an identity with God.³³

This theory of sentience, which appears in both "Usher" and Eureka, is important because it emphasizes the interrelatedness of all things in Poe's material universe and the ineradicable tendency of all things, both animate and inanimate, both Usher and the house of Usher, to succumb or actively seek annihilation in the apocalyptic waters of the tarn in order to return to the unity of nothingness. Because of the "ineradicable tendency" inherent in all matter to return to nothingness, it is not surprising to find that the narrator's description of the house is also a description of Usher's mental make-up and the make-up of the universe:

its principal feature seemed to be that of excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps the eyes of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the

³³E. Arthur Robinson, pp. 68-81.

roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.³⁴

Because of the "perceptible fissure" in the house of Usher and because of the "ineradicable tendency" of all matter to seek a return to nothingness, it is not surprising that Usher, the house of Usher, and the universe eventually rush "asunder"³⁵ in "The Fall of the House of Usher." The reader has been prepared for such an occurrence throughout the narrator's tale. It is less obvious, however, why Poe chose to title his awful vision of reality, of apocalyptic reality, as Eureka. For Poe is, in Eureka and all of his tales of self-destruction, the "scrutinizing observer" who has a keen eye for discovering the almost imperceptible fissure in the fabric of reality. It is important to realize, however, that, for Poe, his apocalyptic vision is appropriately titled. For Poe had thought, by 1848, that he had at last fathomed the truth about order and disorder in the universe. Instead of avoiding the horrible vision of the abyss Poe cultivated that vision; he followed that vision to its logical, metaphysical end, and did not, in the end, choose to rely upon the autonomy of art in order to avoid the implications of that "perceptible fissure" in man's life and universe. Poe grew to feel that there was something logical and orderly, and almost religious, in the cycles of birth and apocalypse of an infinite number

³⁴ Complete Tales, p. 233.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 245.

of universes. He eventually placed his hope in the cycle of birth and apocalypse for a general recognition by men of what it means to be in an ever-expanding and contracting universe,

think that the sense of individual identity will be gradually merged in the general consciousness--that Man, for example, ceasing imperceptibly to feel himself Man, will at length attain that awfully triumphant epoch when he shall recognize his existence as that of Jehovah. In the meantime bear in mind that all is Life--Life--Life within Life--the less the greater, and all within the Spirit Divine.³⁶

³⁶ Complete Tales, p. 259.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY

While it is true that most of Edgar Allan Poe's works center upon the grotesque and arabesque aspects of life, it is not true, as some readers and critics would have it, that Poe should be relegated to a minor niche in the hierarchy of American letters because his works appear to lack a consistent and mature view of reality. Those readers who would so categorize Poe have confused his artistic method with his aesthetic goals and have been unable to separate the popular image of Poe as a haunted, frightened, somewhat immature figure from the images of some of his fictional protagonists. Such readers have not read Poe's works as a whole and have not been able to perceive how Poe used the effects of a disorderly universe upon the minds of his protagonists in order to explore the boundaries of an ordered and disordered universe.

Edgar Allan Poe was an artist who felt the need to explore the minds of his protagonists and the nature of the environment which surrounded those minds in order to define reality and eventually, once reality was defined in terms of order and disorder, to transform disorder into order by fashioning a place and purpose for it in a complex and consistent world view.

Once Poe's works are read as a whole, it becomes clear that Poe was much more than a sensationalist who dwelt upon horror and disorder for their own sakes. The very fact that most of Poe's protagonists are restless individuals in search of something somewhere and the fact that these protagonists move in a medium of journey and abyss motifs should be enough evidence to convince the reader of Poe's works that he attempted to create something other than sensationalism. Poe used the abyss and journey motifs as artistic tools to a greater aesthetic end: a definition of reality. Poe's protagonists constantly don the vestments of questing, questioning voyageurs in search not of horror and disorder but of psychic peace and order. It is to Poe's credit that he did not ignore the abyss on his journeys toward his final aesthetic cosmology, Eureka. As Poe's protagonists move through nature, psyche, the soul, and the universe itself, none of the horrifying elements of such a psychic journey have been glossed over. Poe is precise in his delineation of terror, both physical and psychical but, as in Eureka, he is also precise in fashioning his metaphysics of apocalypse in which order and disorder are most fully defined and shaped into an aesthetic whole. It is no small and immature feat for an artist to explore the abyss of nature, the abyss of conscience, the order of art, and the order of rationality and then forge the disparate elements of his quest into a prose-poem which

attempts almost to religiously encompass the light and the dark of order and disorder. It is no small feat for an artist such as Poe to fashion a cosmology that not only throws a unifying light on his tales and his poems, but also attempts to fashion hope for the man who has experienced the "blackness of darkness" halfway between the pit and the pendulum.

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