

THE ABYSS IMAGE AND THE CONCEPT OF PERVERSENESS  
IN SELECTED WORKS OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Department of English  
University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Victor Joseph Vitanza

August 1970

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## ABSTRACT

The abyss image appears throughout the works of Edgar Allan Poe. The image takes various forms, for instance, a whirlwind, a maelstrom, a mirror, a black tarn, or an eye of one of the characters. At first Poe's use of the image in several of his parodies and humorous tales-- "Metzengerstein," "The Duc De L'Omelette," and "A Tale of Jerusalem"-- has no consistent meaning. However, about mid-point in his writing career, Poe began consistently to associate the image with a demonic force which he calls Perverseness. In a series of three tales-- "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," and "The Imp of the Perverse"-- Poe evolves an explanation for his concept of Perverseness and does so by associating it with the extended metaphor of the abyss. Poe's narrator explains that while he is high upon a precipice a Perverse impulse urges him to leap into the abyss. As soon as the narrator attempts through reason to check this impulse or passion for self-destruction, he does exactly what he does not want to do. The struggle, as Poe defines it, is between reason and passion (impulse for self-destruction) with reason always falling impotent to passion.

Although Poe does not explicitly illustrate and explain Perverseness until the tale "The Imp," he, nonetheless, implicitly presents heroes who confront the Perverse attraction of the abyss. The tales "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "William Wilson" are allegories in which Poe externalizes the conflict of reason and passion in the characters Ligeia and Rowena, Madeline and the narrator, and the two William Wilsons.

In his sea tales Poe sends his characters on a voyage into the abyss and uses their discoveries to present Perverseness as a universal phenomenon endemic to all men. In The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, Poe's hero is a symbol for Perverseness; the name Pym is an anagram for imp. In the first part of the narrative, Poe examines the Perverse acts which Pym as an individual perpetrates against his family, his friends, and himself. In the second part, he uses contrasting images of black and white to investigate Perverseness as an impulse which is in the collective unconsciousness of all men. On the literal level Pym voyages from civilization to barbarianism to the final white cataract and on the symbolic level from consciousness to preconsciousness to subconsciousness. In the shorter pieces "Ms. Found in a Bottle" and especially in "Descent into the Maelstrom" and "The Pit and the Pendulum," Poe looks for a way to combat the threat of Perverseness. His heroes in these tales are able to relax the tension between reason and passion by becoming curious and by embracing the threat of their own self-destruction.

From these short pieces, Poe evolves his hero C. Auguste Dupin. Dupin is the result of Poe's intense anxiety to feel that the world is rational and to create at least one character with the necessary solidarity to withstand the ever-present abyss of the mind. But much like those poets and novelists who exploit and indulge in sentiments for their own sake, Poe to the opposite extreme in the tales of ratiocination overindulges in the exhibition of reason for its own sake. In the late landscape pieces--"The Landscape Garden" and "The Domain of

Arnheim"--Poe attempts to reconstruct the prelapsarian world by having his hero Ellison remove the treacherous abysses from the landscape. He hopes to remove the threat of Perverseness and to recreate what poets of all ages have aspired to--an earthly paradise. However, these tales in which he attempts to reestablish for his characters a union with a benevolent nature are not as successful as the earlier and more numerous tales of Perverseness.

Shortly after the landscape pieces, Poe wrote Eureka. The prose poem can be seen as Poe's synthesis of the experiences of those heroes who were destroyed physically or psychically in their confrontations with the imp of the Perverse and as the explanation of the Perverse force motivating his heroes. Whereas in the tales reason and passion motivate Poe's heroes to leap into the abyss, in Eureka on a cosmological level the principles of repulsion and attraction force all matter through the cosmic vortex back to the original unity of all things. Thus, the plight of each Poe hero becomes a reflection of the Perverse nature of things. This demonic force compels all of his heroes--in fact, compels all matter and energy--back into the first Unity of all things. The impulse of the Perverse is the force which, despite the seeming paradox, establishes the relationship between God and His creation, the force which guarantees the continuation of His creation through the destruction of matter and reshaping it into a higher form as it moves through the void or the abyss to be unified once again with God.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE ABYSS AS THE IMAGE FOR THE CONCEPT OF PERVERSENESS

Perhaps no author in the history of American literature has been the subject of such an active controversy and condemnation as Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49). As a man, he has been criticized for his drinking and drug taking, for his inability to get along with his foster father, John Allan, and in general for his psychological problems. As an author, he has been considered merely a writer of jingles and gothic tales, many of which were said to be plagiarized. However, in the past two decades, Poe's critics have begun to reevaluate his works and specifically to consider his views of man and the world in which man exists. These recent critics have noted that Poe was interested in a number of themes--for instance, Ratiocination, Metempsychosis, Perverseness, Premature Burial, and the Doppelgänger. Of these themes, Perverseness in particular has received the least attention, and its association with the image of the abyss, which appears frequently throughout Poe's works, has not been adequately investigated. A few critics have mentioned in passing Poe's penchant for this image, but no one has examined at any length its occurrence in the tales and the significance it has in Poe's works. Allen Tate says, for example, in his discussion of Eureka, "the image of the abyss is in all of Poe's serious



writings."<sup>1</sup> Richard Wilbur also notes the "many spirals or vortices" in Poe's fiction and says that since "they always appear at the same terminal point, . . . a strong indication" exists "that the spiral has some symbolic value for Poe."<sup>2</sup> The abyss image and related figures appear to be of central importance to Poe, as Tate, Wilbur, and others suggest. Even a cursory investigation shows that the image is part of Poe's concept of Perverseness, the force which compels his more important heroes to act against their will. Poe most fully defines

<sup>1</sup>Allen Tate, "The Angelic Imagination," Collected Essays (Denver: Allan Swallow, 1959), 452.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Wilbur, "The House of Poe," Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 100. Wilbur associates the image with "the loss of consciousness, and the descent of the mind into sleep." Others who mention Poe's use of the image are James E. Miller, Jr., in Quests Surd and Absurd: Essays in American Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 254-55; Baron Levi St. Armand, "In the American Manner: An Inquiry into the Aesthetics of Emily Dickinson and Edgar Allan Poe" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, 1968), p. 222; Maria Elisabeth Kronegger, James Joyce and Associated Image Makers (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1968), chaps. ii-iv. Also, Jean Paul Weber in "L'analyse thematique, hier, aujourd'hui et demain," Etudes Francaises, II (February, 1966), 63-64, has announced his forthcoming essay--an essay which has not yet appeared--on the motif of the abyss in Poe's works; however, Claude Richard in "Poe Studies in Europe: France," Poe Newsletter, II, No. 1 (January, 1969), 23, says, "Jean Paul Weber's 'thematic' Freudian criticism is not so well known: but after the rigidly systematic clock-image of 'Edgar Poe ou le Theme de L'horloge,' Nouvelle Revue Francaise, VI (1958), 301-311, 493-503/ in which the insistent motif of the clock in Poe's works is accounted for by reference to unconscious memories from childhood, I expect with some apprehension his forthcoming interpretation of the abyss motif which he considers to be an obsession that originated in a fall from an apple-tree." Few in-depth studies

this concept in his tale "The Imp of the Perverse" in which the extended metaphor of the abyss has a form-content relationship to the concept of Perverseness and ultimately to a large segment of Poe's work. Although these commentators on Poe's works have noted the abyss imagery, they have not adequately investigated the concept of Perverseness and shown the relationship of the abyss imagery to it. An extended examination of the many forms of the abyss imagery should reveal the meaning Poe intended them to have. Such an approach offers a new way of examining Poe's fiction and his prose poem Eurcka and, in particular, a new way of viewing the Poe hero and Poe's idea of man in the nineteenth century.

The image of the abyss and its variants are representations of bottomless gulfs or pits, chasms or any profound depth or

have been made of Poe's imagery since the psychoanalytic critic Gaston Bachelard in his five volumes divided Poe's images into the four elements and temperaments; see La Psychanalyse du feu. Paris: Gallimard, 1938 [The work has been translated by Allan C. M. Ross. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964]; and L'eau et les rêves: essai sur l'imagination de la matière. Paris: J. Corti, 1942 ["Water and Dreams by Gaston Bachelard: An Annotated Translation with Introduction by the Translator." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1965]; and L'Air et les songes: essai sur l'imagination du mouvement. Paris: J. Corti, 1943; La terre et les rêveries de la volativité. Paris: J. Corti, 1948; La terre et les rêveries du repos. Paris: J. Corti, 1948. For an investigation of the chronological development of Poe's imagery, including the abyss image, see Hans Walter Gottschalk, "The Imagery of Poe's Poems and Tales" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1949), pp. 41-44. In other studies critics compare Poe's use of the abyss with similar images employed by other writers of his century; for instance, see Clark Griffith, "Caves and Cave Dwellers: The Study of a Romantic Image," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, LXII (1963), 551-568, and Richard Macksey, "The Artist in the Labyrinth," Modern Language Notes, LXXVII (1962), 239-256.

void.<sup>3</sup> Poe uses the image of the abyss in several poems, such as "The City in the Sea," "The Valley of Unrest," "Dream-Land," "The Raven," and "Ulalume." In "The City in the Sea," as the title suggests, a city is submerged in water and awaits a further plunge into the depths of darkness. In "The Raven," perhaps Poe's most famous poem, the narrator confronts the abyss when he opens the door and sees "Darkness there and nothing more." He sits "Deep into that darkness peering."<sup>4</sup> And in the closing image of the poem, the "shadow" may also be considered a variation of the abyss, for the speaker says his "soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor/ Shall be lifted--nevermore!" (M, I, 369). The imagery in this instance closely corresponds with the tarn which lies before the House of Usher and into which the house at last falls, "to be lifted--nevermore!"

The imagery is developed more fully in the tales, in which it may take the form of a whirlwind, a maelstrom, a bottomless pit, a

<sup>3</sup>For further definitions, especially in the context of eastern religion and philosophy, see "abyss" in Gertrude Jobes, Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols, Vol. I of 3 vols. New York: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1962. Additional information may be found in J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. from the Spanish by Jack Sage. New York: Philosophical Library, 1962. The abyss image as an archetype in literature is discussed by Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 100-104.

<sup>4</sup>All quotations from Poe's poems are taken from the Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, Vol. I of a projected complete works (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 365, hereafter cited in the text as M, followed by volume number and page number.

yawning abyss, the hold of a ship, a mirror, a black tarn, or even an eye of one of the characters. In "The Pit and the Pendulum," the narrator regains consciousness in a black pit. The old Norse seaman in "The Descent into the Maelstrom" relates his encounter with a Moskoe-strom. The narrator in the opening paragraphs of "The Fall of the House of Usher" confronts a black tarn which reflects Roderick's decaying mansion. Hans Pfaall in the tale with the same name makes his voyage through an abyss of space and ascends by way of an abyss-shaped (inverted dunce cap) balloon. And Pym in The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym in succeeding episodes is locked up in the hold of a ship, falls into a pit of black granite, and confronts the white cataract.

At first Poe's use of the image in several of his parodies and humorous tales--"Metzengerstein," "The Duc De L'Omelette," and "A Tale of Jerusalem"--has no consistent meaning. Whatever Poe had in mind consciously or unconsciously in using the image in these tales is difficult to determine. Perhaps in using them he was parodying the stock figures of speech often found in the gothic tales of his day.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Much speculation exists about exactly when Poe began to take his tales seriously; Edward H. Davidson in Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 138, says, "With some variations in stress, technique, and character Poe turned fooling into art: from the very early 'Metzengerstein' and 'Assignation' it is not very far to 'The House of Usher,' only five or six years later. What Poe began by burlesquing and ridiculing he afterward discovered could be made a masterly inquiry into the diseased and sin-ridden soul of man." Michael Allen in Poe and

For whatever reason, the images are some of the most striking that Poe uses, and many of them later find their way into his more serious tales.

Of these early uses of the image of the abyss, the first appears in "Metzengerstein." In that satiric tale<sup>6</sup> the young Baron Frederick von Metzengerstein awakens one night in the midst of a deep slumber to ride the steed which had earlier materialized from a portion of the tapestry in his castle. "Mounting in hot haste," the narrator says, young Frederick "bounded away into the mazes of the forest."<sup>7</sup> The baron's servants, seeing him depart, wait with apprehension for his return. Moments before the horse with the baron still astride it returns from the labyrinthine forest, the "battlements of the Chateau Metzengerstein" begin "crackling and rocking to their very foundation,

the British Magazine Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 122-126, argues in contrast to Davidson that many of Poe's early tales were as serious to him as his last and that Poe did not, at first, write humorous tales and then serious ones. Allen says, Poe "felt the need, in the earlier years of his career, to defend his more sensational stories, not only by deprecation, but by claiming that some or all of them had actually been intended as burlesques."

<sup>6</sup>For "Metzengerstein" as a satiric tale, see Edward H. Davidson's "notes" to the tales in Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe, Riverside Editions (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956), p. 499.

<sup>7</sup>All quotations from Poe's tales are taken from The Complete Poems and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn and Edward H. O'Neill (2 vols.; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), I, 99, hereafter cited in the text as Q, followed by volume number and page number.

under the influence of a dense and livid mass of ungovernable fire" (Q, I, 99-100). The specter horse with Frederick on its back "bound[s] far up the tottering staircases of the palace" and vanishes "amid the whirlwind of chaotic fire" (Q, I, 100).<sup>8</sup> Later, Poe uses the abyss image again in his tale "The Fall of the House of Usher." As in "Metzengerstein," a whirlwind signals the annihilation of Poe's hero. This time it agitates the vapor rising from the tarn surrounding the house (Q, I, 273-74), and in the closing scene the whirlwind sweeps through the "fissure" rapidly widening it and causing "the mighty walls" of the House of Usher to rush "asunder" into "the deep and dank tarn" (Q, I, 277). A difference exists, however, in Poe's use of the image in these two tales. In "Usher," Poe integrates the image into the serious tone of the tale, whereas in the first, he juxtaposes Metzengerstein's riding into the "whirlwind of chaotic fire" with the humorous intent of the last paragraph as well as with the satiric quality of the entire tale. Poe almost intrusively directs his reader to interpret the story as a spoof when he includes in the

<sup>8</sup>The "whirlwind of chaotic fire," as a variation of the abyss image (in particular, a whirlpool), is intimately linked with the fiery steed. Grace P. Smith in "Poe's 'Metzengerstein,'" Modern Language Notes, XLVIII (1933), 358, suggests that Poe's horse is a variation of the "waterhorse (kelpie)" of folklore. The horse "come[s] out of a pool or lake, or even out of the sea, allowing itself to be mounted only to plunge again into the water" destroying "its rider." Unlike Poe's use of the images of the whirlwind, those found in the Old Testament are generally benevolent; for instance, God the Father "answered Job out of the whirlwind" (Job 38:01, 40:06) and carried "Elijah" in a whirlwind "up to heaven" (2K1 2:01, 2:11).

last paragraph the images of "preternatural light" and the "cloud of smoke" which forms "over the battlements in the distinct colossal figure of--a horse" (Q, I, 100).

In another of Poe's humorous tales, "The Duc De L'Omelette," the abyss-like image is a minor motif. Poe does not use it, as in "Metzengerstein," to contribute to the overall humor, but rather as mere description. In the tale the hero, De L'Omelette, "expire[s]" in a paroxysm of disgust" and awakens to confront "Baal-Zebub, Prince of the Fly" (Q, I, 101). Poe humorously has his hero make several attempts to get away from the devil. But De L'Omelette must face the inevitable. Being introduced into the devil's "apartment," De L'Omelette describes the upper part of the interior as an inverted abyss in the sky. "It was not its length or its breadth," he says, "but its height . . . . There was no ceiling . . . but a dense whirling mass of fiery-colored clouds." And as if looking down into a yawning abyss, De L'Omelette's "brain reeled as he glanced upward" (Q, I, 101-102). In the much later serious tale "A Descent into the Maelstrom," Poe uses an abyss image similar to the one in "The Duc De L'Omelette." In "A Descent" the narrator looks toward the sky and sees not an ominous sign, but rather hope. The narrator, caught within the darkness of the maelstrom, looks up into "the heavens." He recalls,

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 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 everything about us with the greatest distinctness--but, oh God, what a scene it was to light up! (Q, I, 348).

As a sign of hope, the "deep bright blue . . . clear sky" and "the full moon" foreshadow the narrator's eventual release from the maelstrom.

In yet another humorous story, "A Tale of Jerusalem," Poe uses abyss imagery. In this tale, however, he employs the images of the precipice and the abyss to implement the humor, whereas in "Matzengerstein" he only associates the image with his burlesque intention and in "Le Duc De L'Omelette" uses it as mere description. The humor in "The Tale of Jerusalem," as in other tales such as "The Spectacles" and "The Sphinx," results from his characters' distorted vision of reality. Throughout the tale, Poe carefully refers to the atmospheric conditions and to the distance of the Romans from the Jews in order to prepare for the final, humorous misperception. In the tale the Romans have besieged the city of Jerusalem, and the inhabitants of the city, surrounded by the enemy, have bargained with the Roman Pompey for a sacrificial lamb. The Jews confer "with the besieging army" from "the loftiest of all the turrets around about Jerusalem." The Pharisee, Poe writes, "peered dizzily over the precipice" (Q, I, 104). "From the giddy pinnacle," "he looked over into the abyss." Because of the "vast height" of the pinnacle and "the prevalence of a fog" (Q, I, 105), the Jews see "'the uncircumcised



[as numerous] as the sands by the seashore--as the locusts in the wilderness!" (Q, I, 104). None of the Romans appears to the Jews "any bigger than the letter Jod!" The Jews, already having passed down "the shekkels of silver" in payment for the sacrificial lamb, begin to pull up the beast. As they perform the task--it takes them an hour--they look down into the abyss and see, at first, "a ram," then, "a firstling of the flock," and finally, "a fatted calf." But what they perceive proves false. "A low grunt," Poe writes, "betrayed to their perception a hog of no common size" or what they at last identify as "the unutterable flesh!" (Q, I, 106, Poe's italics).

Although Poe in his early satiric tales uses the image of the abyss without a consistent meaning, the image, as do many other abyss or abyss-like images in literature, represents a hostile landscape--for instance, the labyrinth in which Theseus encounters the minotaur, the abyss into which Satan falls, and the pit into which Dante descends. Northrop Frye, in his discussion of archetypal meaning, categorizes these abyss or abyss-like images as demonic and calls them "the sinister counterparts of geometrical images: the sinister spiral (the maelstrom, whirlpool, or charybdis), the sinister cross, and the sinister circle, the wheel of fate or fortune."<sup>9</sup> The images represent a demonic view of the world. Broadly stated, he says, the demonic world is that "of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and

<sup>9</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 150.

pain and confusion; the world as it is before the human imagination begins to work on it and before any image of human desire, such as the city or the garden, has been solidly established; the world also of perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly."<sup>10</sup>

The Poesque landscape,<sup>11</sup> in several of the minor tales as well as in a number of the major, is as demonic as any that Frye points to in his discussion of the demonic world view. For the Poe heroes

<sup>10</sup>Frye, p. 147. Poe's vision of the world as embodied in his works is basically demonic not only because of his predominant use of the abyss image but also because of his world view portrayed in terms of other demonic images. For instance, other forms of a demonic image, says Frye, are "the tantalizing female, a physical object of desire which is sought as a possession and . . . can never be possessed," and "the demonic parody of marriage, or the union of two souls in one flesh, which may take the form of hermaphroditism, incest . . . or homosexuality" (149). The "tantalizing female[s]" are numerous in Poe's works, for example, Lenore in "The Raven," Annabel Lee, Marchesa Aphrodite in "The Assigination," Berenice, and Ligeia. The "union of two souls in one flesh" may be seen in Ligeia's strong will to come back to life in the Lady Rowena's body and also the incestuous relationship between Roderick and Madeline Usher. Demonic images in the inorganic world, Frye points out, include "engines of torture." Such an engine is found in "The Pit and the Pendulum"; in fact, not only the pendulum but also the pit itself is an engine as it contracts forcing the narrator toward the abyss.

<sup>11</sup>Poe's landscape has been discussed by James M. Kiehl, "The Valley of Unrest: A Major Metaphor in the Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe," *Thoth*, V (Winter, 1964), 42-52; Stephen L. Mooney, "Poe's Gothic Wasteland," *Sewanee Review*, LXX (Spring, 1962), 261-283; Nina Baym, "The Function of Poe's Pictorialism," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LXV (Winter, 1966), 46-54; Charles L. Sandford, "Edgar Allan Poe," in *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 297-307.

of the serious tales the world resembles the topography of hell; Poe's bottomless pits, whirlpools of both water and fire, tombs for the living, labyrinths, yawning abysses, wastelands, and melancholy tarns contribute to his heroes' suffering and at times eventually to the heroes' agonizing death. Along with the Poe heroes in tales already mentioned, others suffer from or tell of similar malignant surroundings. In the tale "Silence--a Fable," a demon who lives in a tomb tells the narrator about a remote region of the world where a "vast illimitable" wasteland exists. The demon, in describing this traditional Valley of the Shadow, says, "the waters of the river . . . palpitate forever and forever . . . with a tumultuous and convulsive motion"; "gigantic water lilies . . . sigh one unto the other"; and "tall primeval trees rock eternally . . . with a crashing and mighty sound" (Q, I, 219). When he has finished the fable, the demon falls "back within the cavity of the tomb and laughs" at the narrator's confusion (Q, I, 220-221).

In a more subtle way the "quaint . . . old building" in which William Wilson lived and attended school is also demonic, "a palace of enchantment." The house, as he describes it, is a maze. He says,

There was really no end to its windings--to its incomprehensible subdivisions. It was difficult, at any given time, to say with certainty upon which of its two stories one happened to be. From each room to every other there were sure to be found three or four steps either in ascent or descent. Then the lateral branches were innumerable--inconceivable--and so returning in upon themselves, that our most exact ideas in regard to the whole mansion were not very far different

from those with which we pondered upon infinity. During the five years of my residence here, I was never able to ascertain with precision, in what remote locality lay the little sleeping apartment assigned to myself and some eighteen or twenty other scholars (Q, I, 279).

Poe later parallels Wilson's description of the house with the hero's flight from his double, "the second William Wilson." No matter where he goes throughout Europe, at every turn Wilson confronts, as in a maze-like house of mirrors, his self-image and double, the second William Wilson. Exhausted from running, Wilson decides to "submit no longer to be enslaved" by his counterpart. At a carnival in Rome, Wilson, in pursuit of a woman, "forc[es his] way through the mazes" (Q, I, 291, italics added) of people, only to confront once again the second William Wilson. Moments later in a small room, Wilson struggles with his double and fatally wounds him. For a moment his attention is distracted; when he glances back, he sees only himself "all pale and dabbled in blood" (Q, I, 292) reflected in a mirror. Thus, both demonic images of the maze and the mirror are linked together in the final scene.

In other less well-known tales, Poe's landscape is demonic. In "The Island of the Fay" the narrator, while wandering through "a far distant region" with "sad rivers and melancholy tarns writhing or sleeping within all," chances upon a "rivulet and island" (Q, I, 355). The western side is a "radiant harem of garden beauties," whereas the eastern side is "whelmed in the blackest shade" (Q, I, 356). He observes that a fay in a canoe paddles around the island. As the

fay passes from west to east, from light to darkness, she is "'swallowed up by the dark water, making its blackness more black'" (Q, I, 357). The manner of the fay's death is similar to that of a number of Poe heroes. As already mentioned, the characters in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Raven" confront death in both a physical and metaphorical pool or tarn. In "The Oval Portrait" an artist paints his bride so realistically that with each of his strokes on the oval canvas she slowly "withers" in "health and . . . spirit" (Q, I, 383). As the fay, she is eventually absorbed into the oval portrait--itself, shaped like a pool--and dies.<sup>12</sup>

About mid-point in his career, Poe began consistently to associate the demonic image of the abyss with a force threatening his heroes. The tale most crucial to an understanding of the meaning behind this abyss imagery is "The Imp of the Perverse," for in it Poe not only uses the metaphor in its most extended form in his works but also explains the force it represents. "The Imp of the Perverse" is the third of a series of three stories which critics and editors usually classify as compulsive-confession tales, "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," and "The Imp of the Perverse." The plots of the three tales are similar in that the narrators for some unaccountable reason are compelled to kill a fellow human being and then to confess their crimes. Poe in these three tales is concerned with defining

<sup>12</sup>See Patrick F. Quinn's discussion of these tales in his chapter "The Pool and the Portrait" in The French Face of Edgar Poe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957), 257-75.

the reason for the narrators' actions. In the first story Poe merely introduces the situation in which the narrator finds himself and gives little explanation for the narrator's killing the old man other than revulsion at the victim's strange eye. However, in "The Black Cat" for the first time Poe discusses at some length what he calls "the spirit of Perverseness." And finally in "The Imp of the Perverse" he uses the greater portion of the tale to explain the concept; in fact, the piece actually is more a treatise on Perverseness than a story. The story proper, at the end of the tale and no more than a page long, serves as an exemplum, while the rest of the tale is devoted to a theoretical discussion of the narrator's concept of the Perverse.

The narrator of the "Imp of the Perverse," who awaits his punishment for having killed a man, defines the impulse which has compelled him into killing, an impulse which he calls Perverseness. He opens his discussion by declaring that phrenologists<sup>13</sup> as well as moralists before them in considering the "faculties and impulses . . . of the prima mobilia of the human soul" did not account for a "propensity" in man "existing as a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment." The narrator explains that phrenologists failed to

<sup>13</sup>Poe and his contemporaries were influenced by the pseudo-science of phrenology; see John D. Davies, Phrenology: Fad and Science: A 19th-Century American Crusade. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955; Edward Hungerford, "Poe and Phrenology," American Literature, II (1930), 209-31.

account for the "propensity" because they used deductive and teleological methods in their attempts to understand man's place in God's creation. The narrator says, "We saw no need of the impulse--for the propensity. We could not perceive its necessity. . . . We could not have understood in what manner it might be made to further the objects of humanity, either temporal or eternal" (Poe's italics). In contrasting their systems of philosophy and in arriving at God's intentions, "the intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs--to dictate purpose to God" (Q, II, 637). Thus, whatever did not fit into the assumed purpose of God's creation or whatever was not perceived because of the limitations of the deductive method of analysis was discarded knowingly and unknowingly.

After giving several examples of the kind of thinking that metaphysicians in general employed, the narrator turns to the inductive method to demonstrate what phrenologists would have discovered if they had described man's actions instead of prescribing them for him. He says that in man exists "an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something"; it is "a mobile without motive, a motive not motivirt" (Q, II, 638, Poe's italics). The narrator admits, "This overwhelming tendency to do wrong for the wrong's sake" cannot be analyzed; no cause-effect explanation is possible. At best, "It is a radical, a primitive impulse--elementary" (Q, II, 638). The narrator then, as if the discursive approach proved

inadequate, uses the extended metaphor of the abyss to explain Perverseness. He says,

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 precipice's edge, there grows into palpability, a shape, far more terrible than any genius, or any demon of a tale, and yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of 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. . . . 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 (Q, II, 639-40, Poe's italics).<sup>14</sup>

The narrator explains that high upon a precipice he is Perversely urged to destroy himself. Whereas at first he has definite feelings of "dizziness" and "horror," these are later displaced by an "unnameable feeling." This feeling begins to synthesize in his mind so slowly ("By gradations . . . imperceptible") that he is unaware of his impending dilemma. When this feeling, which has not yet developed into a precise thought, does take shape--in this case in

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Q, I, 445 and II, 845.



the image of a cloud--the narrator is horrified. The cloud is equated with a single thought or the narrator's "idea of what would be his sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall." Aware of the danger of such a desire, the narrator attempts to curtail what ultimately is suicidal. At this point in the metaphor, the paradox inherent in Perverseness is drawn. As soon as the narrator balks at the idea of leaping into the abyss, the Perverse force overpowers him. Apparently, the narrator is actually safe as long as he does not fight his feelings of self destruction (this in itself is a paradox), but when he checks this desire to plunge to his death, he does exactly what he does not want to do; in other words, he leaps into the yawning abyss.

The mechanics of Perverseness can be illustrated with the principle of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. The "thesis" is the narrator's sensation or idea of what it would be like to fall. Alone, the feeling is not inherently dangerous. However, when the narrator's "reason violently deters him from the brink," he does "most impetuously approach it." If the narrator's idea (the wanting to jump into the abyss) is the thesis, then the antithesis is his reason or rational mind attempting to control the urge. Inevitably, the urge wins out; the narrator says, "there is no passion in nature so demoniacally impatient." The "passion" to jump overpowers reason and makes it impotent. "To indulge for a moment," the narrator says, "in any attempt at thought, is to be inevitably lost; for reflection but

urges us to forbear." Thus, leaping into the yawning abyss--the synthesis--is the completion of the triad or what also may be called the passing over into the opposite.

The narrator then returns to his previous mode of analysis and says, "beyond or behind this [the spirit of Perverseness] there is no intelligible principle: and we might indeed, deem this perverseness a direct instigation of the Arch-Fiend, were it not occasionally known to operate in furtherance of good" (Q, II, 640). At this point in the tale the narrator makes it quite clear that "perverseness" is not the evil found in the Christian tradition that results from Satan's attempt to avenge himself upon God's creation. In this last of a series of three tales Poe does not present good and evil as opposing forces but instead synthesizes the two in the secular concept of Perverseness.

"The Imp of the Perverse" is the completion of Poe's first two efforts at defining Perverseness. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" the narrator discusses his relationship with the old man whom he eventually kills and the reason, or what appears to be a cause-effect explanation, for the murder. He says,

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. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture--a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees--very gradually--I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever (Q, I, 445).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Little has been written about "The Tell-Tale Heart." Those who have considered the tale do not associate it with "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse" as a logical progression of Poe's

Later in writing "The Black Cat," Poe develops a similar relationship between the narrator and the victim and also has the narrator give a similar rationale for the violence. The narrator of this second tale at some length discusses his love for pets and his "tenderness of heart." He had a cat named Pluto which, he says, "was my favorite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets" (Q, I, 477). However, later, the narrator's temperament changes, and he turns on his pet. He explains, "The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. . . . I took from my waistcoat-pocket a penknife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket!" (Q, I, 478).

Eventually, the open socket of Pluto's eye drives the narrator to his final atrocity. In explaining his ensuing actions, the narrator defines "the spirit of Perverseness":

And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of Perverseness. Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than

formulating the concept of Perverseness, but rather pronounce the narrator insane and also analyze the various symbols of time or consider the story solely a hoax. See, for instance, Arthur Hobson Quinn, Edgar Allan Poe (New York: Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1941), p. 394; Patrick F. Quinn, The French Face, pp. 232-26; E. Arthur Robinson, "Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XIX (March, 1965), 369-78; James W. Gargano, "The Theme of Time in 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" Studies in Short Fiction, V (Summer, 1968), 378-82.

I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart--one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such? This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself--to offer violence to its own nature--to do wrong for the wrong's sake only. . . . (Q, I, 478, Poe's italics).

Then in a less abstract way, but with a number of paradoxes, the narrator explains why he killed his beloved cat, Pluto. It was Perverseness, he writes,

that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute. One morning, in cool 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;--hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin--a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it--if such a thing were possible--even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God (Q, I, 478-79, Poe's italics).

In "The Black Cat" several references to "sin," "Merciful . . . God," and the "Arch-Fiend" (Q, I, 483) suggest that Perverseness is a negative factor (the evil of sin) in God's creation. However, later in "The Imp of the Perverse," Poe makes clear that the concept he is attempting to define is not part of an antithetical tension or struggle between God and Satan or good and evil in the Christian sense. In other words, the Arch-Fiend cannot claim his soul since the narrator is compelled into action and does not choose to act

of his otherwise free will. The dialectical force for the Poe hero is the interplay between what man wants to do and what he does not want to do, with man apparently always compelled into choosing the latter.<sup>16</sup>

In this tale, as in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the eye of the victim becomes the abyss in which the narrators are destroyed. Likewise, in "Morella" Poe associates the abyss-like eye with Perverseness. The relationship the narrator has with his wife, Morella, is platonic. The narrator says, "fate bound us together at the altar; and I never

<sup>16</sup>It is difficult to argue against J. W. Gargano's well-constructed argument "The Black Cat": Perverseness Reconsidered, Texas Studies in Language and Literature, II (Summer, 1960), 172-78<sup>7</sup> that the narrator of "The Black Cat" is "eager to introduce into a world of psychological and moral order a concept that eliminates the onus of responsibility and guilt" (176). However, as suggested earlier, if the three tales directed toward an explanation of Perverseness are studied in sequence and as an evolution of an idea, one would best reserve his judgment of Poe's attitude toward the concept for the final tale, "The Imp of the Perverse." Even though the concept may be against a fundamentalist code of morals, one must place it in historical perspective. Remarkable similarities exist between Poe's concept of Perverseness and other concepts in the nineteenth century; for instance, Kierkegaard's "Concept of Dread" has a similar meaning and an identical metaphor ("leap into the abyss"). Kierkegaard's Concept of Dread is the theologian-philosopher's explanation for Adam and Eve's Fall. See Soren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Dread, trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944. P. F. Quinn, French Face, pp. 160-66, mentions this kinship between Poe and Kierkegaard. Also for a similar concept of Perverseness expressed by Dostoyevsky, see S. B. Purdy, "Poe and Dostoyevsky," Studies in Short Fiction, IV (1967), 169-71. For further pertinent comments, see Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, trans. Angus Davidson (2nd ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 145, 147-48, 336, 368. Also, E. H. Davidson sees the tale as a satire against "the Utilitarian theory of morality" "Notes," to Selected Writings, p. 502<sup>7</sup>.

spoke of passion nor thought of love." They spent hours together studying the mystics--she the teacher and he the pupil. However, happiness was short lived; while sitting by her side, the narrator recalls, he would "dwell upon the music of her voice, until . . . its melody was tainted with terror." He says, "there fell a shadow upon my soul, and I grew pale, and shuddered. . . . Joy suddenly faded into horror, and the most beautiful became the most hideous" (Q, I, 152).

To further explain, Poe uses the image of the abyss. The narrator says, "I met the glance of her meaning eyes, and then my soul sickened and became giddy with the giddiness of one who gazes downward into some dreary and unfathomable abyss" (Q, I, 153). Staring into Morella's eyes, the narrator longs for her death. Shortly, his wish is fulfilled, and the moment before she dies, Morella announces to her husband that she is to have a child, "thy child and mine" (Q, I, 154). Certainly, an inconsistency exists at this point in the story since the narrator spoke earlier of a platonic relationship and since it would be absurd for the narrator not to know of Morella's pregnancy before her death. Poe, however, is not interested in logic, but rather in the force which compels the narrator. After ten years ("two lustra"), the narrator decides he must name his daughter. "At the baptismal font," the narrator says, "I hesitated for a name." He stops to think, as the narrator staring into the abyss, and is confronted by a "demon"; a "fiend," he says, "spoke from the recesses of my soul [and] I whispered within the ears of the

holy man the syllables--Morella." At this moment, his daughter turns "her glassy eyes from earth to heaven," and collapsing to "the black slabs," says, "'I am here!'" (Q, I, 155).

Perverseness in "Morella" is the narrator's being compelled into doing what he does not want to do. The narrator stares into Morella's abyss-like eyes and grows to hate the woman he originally loved. With her death, he is rid of her. However, she has left an offspring behind whom he loves. After much hesitation, he decides to christen the child; in front of the baptismal font, he hesitates and is compelled by a "demon"--in a later tale identified as the imp of the Perverse--to pronounce her "Morella." In a similar manner as Ligeia, Morella is reincarnated in her child, a being left behind to insure her return.

For the Poe hero the abyss of the whirl (often a pun on "world"--Q, I, 344) is existence in its most hostile form and cannot be avoided. "The Imp of the Perverse" and other stories suggest that Poe sees all men perched upon the precipice, that he sees man born peering into the abyss. Apparently, at first, only certain individual men, not all of mankind, suffer from the impulse for self-destruction. As the narrator in "Ms. Found in a Bottle" says, "We mankind are surely doomed to hover continually upon the brink of eternity, without taking a final plunge into the abyss" (Q, I, 134). However, the narrator's final words are "going down" (Q, I, 136), and his manuscript, which he places in a bottle for posterity, remains as a final testament to the inevitable end that all men must face. Later

heroes, such as Roderick Usher and William Wilson, as well as the narrators of the compulsive-confession tales, are also susceptible to the impulse of the Perverse and are destroyed both mentally and physically, while others, such as the old man in "A Descent into the Maelstrom," the narrator in "The Pit and the Pendulum," and Pym in The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, experience only a temporary, futile "hope" of avoiding destruction. These latter narrators' or heroes' explorations of outer or inner space on their voyages into the abyss are Poe's attempts to penetrate the veil surrounding the Perverse force, which is a threat to all men living in the world. These heroes through their experiences become prophets of the destiny of mankind; for instance, the narrator of "The Descent"--as a guide--tells all of those who will listen about his encounter with the maelstrom.

A few of the Poe heroes, on the other hand, have learned how for a while to survive the hostile world. Those who survive, do so because of their apparent ability to use both reason and imagination to their benefit; in other words, they are able to outwit "The Imp of the Perverse"--as Poe often phrases the concept--and to check the Perverse force which compels others to leap into the abyss. C. Auguste Dupin, the noted hero of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Roget," and "The Purloined Letter," who is a genius at solving crimes but who operates on the periphery of the law, is perhaps Poe's most well-adjusted hero and the one who succeeds in avoiding the imp of the Perverse. His almost super-human reason is aided by his ability



to go a few steps further with his imagination. However, Dupin's success at surviving is rare for the Poe hero. In three other tales Poe attempts to create heroes who are similar to Dupin in the characters of William Legrand in "The Gold Bug" and Ellison in "The Landscape Garden" and "The Domain of Arnheim." Legrand recaptures his lost fortune by decoding Captain Kidd's cryptogram and locating the buried treasure, and Ellison, inheriting an immense sum of money, spends his fortune removing the abysses from the landscape and attempting to recreate the Garden before the Fall.<sup>17</sup> The invention of Ellison in "The Domain of Arnheim" seemingly is Poe's attempt toward the end of his years to paint an artificial landscape of a world he had often dreamed of but could not find, to build a poet's garden or "a great good place" away from a hostile world full of abysses.

Thus, the abyss imagery and the concept of Perverseness as developed in the tales are intimately related in Poe's mind. Even in his first tale, "Metzengerstein," Poe begins consciously or unconsciously to associate the image of the abyss with the concept of Perverseness. In subsequent tales such as "Morella," "A Descent into

<sup>17</sup>For a discussion of Poe's attitude toward landscape gardening, see Robert D. Jacobs, Poe: Journalist and Critic (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), pp. 428-33. Also, for landscape gardening in the context of western literature, see Harry Levin, "Paradises, Heavenly and Earthly," in The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 163-186.

the Maelstrom" and "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," he continues to define the demonic force. Finally, in a series of three tales, he evolves an explanation for the force and concentrates the abyss imagery in general into one intellectual pattern--the extended metaphor of the abyss. This demonic force compels all of his heroes--in fact, compels all matter and energy--back into the first unity of all things. As will be shown in the following chapters, the imp of the Perverse is the force which, despite the seeming paradox, establishes the relationship between God and His creation, the force which guarantees the continuation of this creation through the destruction of matter and reshaping it into a higher form as it moves through the void or the abyss to be unified once again with God. Some Poe heroes such as the narrators of "Ligeia" and "William Wilson" have no understanding of the force which threatens them, while others such as Roderick Usher, even though they understand what is happening to them, are unable to hold off the imp or impulse of self-destruction. Those characters such as the narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" who are saved from the abyss have only temporary reprieves and wait for a later death. In the midst of a world rushing back to unity, C. Auguste Dupin is the only Poe character able to outwit the imp in the abyss.

## CHAPTER II

### PERVERSENESS IN THREE TALES: "LIGEIA," "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER," AND "WILLIAM WILSON"

Although it is not until "The Imp of the Perverse" that Poe presents an explicit illustration and explanation of Perverseness in the extended metaphor of the abyss, in the earlier tales the same situation and the same forces are present implicitly. Perhaps Poe is in these tales struggling with the concept and striving to move toward the concise definition he eventually formulates.

In three of these earlier tales, "William Wilson," "Ligeia," and "The Fall of the House of Usher," the Poe hero cannot control the imp of the Perverse, and he is destroyed. The tale in which the struggle between the impulse of self-destruction and of reason is the most clearly presented is "William Wilson." An understanding of the mechanics of Perverseness in this tale will be of some help, then, in understanding how the other tales, "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," are also concerned with Perverseness.

Because of the struggle between the two Wilsons in "William Wilson," critics have speculated on how to evaluate the tale. Some<sup>1</sup> suggest that "William Wilson" is in great part autobiographical--with

<sup>1</sup>For instance, see Killis Campbell, The Mind of Poe and Other Studies (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1962), p. 135; Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 142; Patrick F. Quinn, The French Face of Edgar Poe (Carbondale, Illinois: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1957), pp. 222-23.

the disciplinarian Dr. Bransby of the tale representing in Poe's unconscious mind the Dr. Bransby and John Allan of his real life, and also the second Wilson representing John Allan. With a psychological frame of reference these critics base the autobiographical parallels on the fact that Poe had difficulties with his foster father, John Allan, and they thus conclude that Poe in the tale is unconsciously struggling with his father figure. Others, in particular Harry Levin, suggest the Doppelgänger or motif of the Double. Poe, Levin writes, is not concerned with "a psychological case of split personality, like that of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," but rather with "the mythical archetype known as the Doppelgänger, a spiritual emanation of the self as it ought to be."<sup>2</sup>

Levin, as others, only mentions in passing the motif of the Double. Certainly, the previous discussions of the motif in "William Wilson" illuminate the tale; however, they fail to illustrate the relationship of the tale with the rest of Poe's works and especially with the concept of Perverseness. Recent studies in literature and psychology suggest a broader view of the motif of the Double than considered before, a view which could give unity to a critical analysis of Poe's characters and their struggles with the imp of the Perverse. "Wilson" as a tale of the Double, as well as "Usher" and "Ligeia," exemplifies Perverseness (the compulsive-confession

<sup>2</sup>Levin, p. 143.

tales share the same relationship of Passion--impulse--versus Reason). But before demonstrating how tales of the Double are related to tales of Perverseness, an analysis of these other early attempts at defining Perverseness is necessary.

In the third of these three tales, "William Wilson," Poe is most successful and least enigmatic in his illustration of the hero's impulse to vex himself. The narrator begins by relating immediately what appears to be an unprecedented temptation and fall. He says, "although temptation may have erewhile existed as great, man was never thus, at least, tempted before--certainly, never thus fell" (Q, I, 278, Poe's italics). Wilson explains that when he fell, "in an instant, all virtue dropped bodily as a mantle." Such statements beg comparison with the first Fall or, in particular, with the fall of the narrators of the compulsive-confession tales. In fact, a close reading of the opening pages of "Wilson" indicates that little difference exists among the tales. But it must be kept in mind that Poe wrote "Wilson" about two and a half years before his first compulsive-confession tale and that apparently much still lay unformulated in his mind. However, Poe is in the tale moving toward a concise definition of the demonic force of Perverseness.

As is true of the other narrators subjected to a Perverse force, Wilson, too, awaits punishment for a crime. This time, unlike the narrators of the compulsive-confession tales, the Poe narrator awaits punishment, not for a homicide, but for a form of suicide. The point

of view is similar in all the tales; the narrator, speaking in the first person, appears also to be confessing. To attract his reader, the narrator almost pleads for attention; he says, "I long . . . for . . . sympathy--I had nearly said for the pity--of my fellow men." He continues, "I would fain have them believe that I have been . . . 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" (Q, I, 277, Poe's italics).

Up to this point, the narrator sounds as if he were just another criminal pleading his innocence. However, Poe--the author--begins subtly to indicate that Wilson is the victim of an uncontrollable passion. Wilson explains that in his youth, even in his "earliest infancy," he "grew self-willed, addicted to the wildest caprices, and a prey to the most ungovernable passions." His parents were unable "to check" his "evil propensities"; and in a short time, "my voice," he says, "was a household law." Thus, he concludes, "I was left to the guidance of my own will, and became, in all but name, the master of my own actions" (Q, I, 278, italics added). Wilson explains by this distinction ("in all but name") that he only appeared to be self-willed when, in actuality, he could not restrain his passions, his impulse for evil. And since his parents failed "to control" his "evil propensities," he became the child of his "will"; as James Cox points out, the anagram of Wilson's name suggests, "Will-I-am,

Will's son."<sup>3</sup> The fact that the name is not his own but is purposely selected by the narrator ("Let me call myself," the narrator says, "William Wilson. The fair page . . . need not be sullied with my real appellation," Q, I, 277) certainly suggests allegory,<sup>4</sup> a study of the human will rather than of a human being himself.

After the initial explanation of his dominating passions, his impulse to act even against reason, Wilson proceeds to unravel the incidents which led to his eventual downfall. First, he recalls his early life at school. There, for the first time, another's discipline restrains his passions, his evil propensities. He describes the building as a prison: "The grounds were extensive, and a high and solid brick wall, topped with a bed of mortar and broken glass, encompassed the whole. This prison-like rampart formed the limit of our domain; beyond it we saw but thrice a week." The gate through which they passed to the outside "was riveted and studded with iron bolts, and surmounted with jagged iron spikes." And, of course, along with a prison-like school goes a principal who is a martinet. Dr. Bransby, Wilson remarks, had a "countenance so demurely benign," yet "with sour visage, and in stuffy habiliments, administered, ferule in hand, the Draconian Laws of the academy" (Q, I, 278).

<sup>3</sup>James M. Cox, "Edgar Poe: Style as Pose," The Virginia Quarterly Review, XLIV (Winter, 1968), 81.

<sup>4</sup>For the Poe tale as allegory, see Edward H. Davidson, "The Tale as Allegory," Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 181-222.

This prison-like world of the school is alien to Wilson, and it constantly puzzles him. Both the house and the schoolroom represent for Wilson the hostile environment of a maze from which he cannot escape. In the "large, rambling Elizabethan house," he could never "ascertain with precision, in what remote locality lay the little sleeping apartment assigned" to him and his fellow schoolmates. And Wilson perceives the schoolroom as a "world" of "narrow" torturous passages, "dismally low" as a labyrinth. The disciplinarian Dr. Bransby has his "sanctum" in one of the many "remote and terror-inspiring angle[s]" of the room (Q, I, 279, Poe's italics). And again with a maze-like description, Wilson recalls that "interspersed about the class room, crossing and recrossing in endless irregularity, were innumerable benches and desks" (Q, I, 280, italics added).

Certainly, the cataloging of maze images could continue. But what these images, as variants of the abyss image, mean for Poe is of primary importance. Richard Wilbur, in his discussion of the architectural interiors in Poe's tales, sees the image as wholly symbolic of reverie, or what he calls "the hypnagogic state"; he says, "If we think of waking life as dominated by reason, and if we think of the reason as a daylight faculty which operates in straight lines, then it is proper that reverie should be represented as an obscure and wandering movement of the mind." "Dim windings," Wilbur continues, "indicate the state of reverie; they point toward that infinite freedom



in and from space which the mind achieves in dreams."<sup>5</sup>

Wilbur's associating reason with "straight lines" and reverie with "dim windings" may apply wholly to other of Poe's works but not entirely to "William Wilson." It is true that on one level Poe does use the image to indicate a state of reverie. Wilson associates his experiences at the maze-like school with "that venerable old town," "a dream-like and spirit-soothing place." The very words he uses in the description reflect reverie: "recollections," "rambling," "misty-looking," "dream-like and spirit-soothing," "in fancy," "deeply-shadowed avenues," "stillness of the dusky atmosphere," "steeple lay imbedded and asleep" (Q, I, 278). However, Poe uses the image with an added subtlety. The school and the classroom both represent the forces of academic life which threaten Wilson's free exercise of will. He finds them to be hostile forces because he cannot cope with them successfully unless he exerts self-discipline over his passion and relies on the power of reason. The maze image is appropriate because, like the abyss image, it represents a hostile environment, and because to free oneself from the environment of the maze, one must exercise the faculty of reason. But Wilson refuses to exercise reason, and he finds it necessary to turn inwards and pass his time in fancy to escape from "the apparently dismal monotony of a school" (Q, I, 280).

<sup>5</sup>Richard Wilbur, "The House of Poe," in Critical Essays, ed. Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1967), 111.

Everyday events of his life, other than his studies at school, "were made to involve a wilderness of sensation, a world of rich incident, a universe of varied emotions, of excitement, the most passionate and spirit-stirring" (*italics added*); in the boundless fancy of his mind he escapes from "the massy walls" of the academy to a "wilderness," to a "world," to a "universe of varied emotions"--all embodying the complete absence of the restraint necessary for self-discipline.

Thus, if the house with its maze-like description is on one level an externalization of Wilson's mind in a state of reverie, it also becomes on another level, a house of intellect, a prison-like maze from which he cannot physically escape and a puzzle for which he cannot find a solution. As noted, he could not determine the exact "locality" of "his little sleeping apartment" in relation to the other scholars; he had no solution for the "greatest paradox" of Dr. Bransby nor for the "plenitude of mystery" in the iron door at the gate; and, most important, he was unable to solve the mystery presented by one of his classmates, a scholar, who, Wilson says, "although no relation, bore the same Christian and surname as myself" (Q, I, 280).

This second Wilson becomes for William Wilson a kind of conscience, a force of reason which, like those forces represented by maze images, attempts to interfere with Wilson's will. "My namesake" (Q, I, 280), Wilson recalls, "presumed to compete with me in the studies of the class . . . to refuse . . . submission to my will." "His" was an "impertinent and dogged interference with my purposes" (Q, I, 281).

And in a phrase similar to that used by a later narrator in "The Black Cat" ("the spirit of Perverseness," Q, I, 478), he speaks of his counterpart's "rivalry," "his intolerable spirit of contradiction" (Q, I, 281).

Wilson relates that one night, while attempting another of his many futile practical jokes on his likeness, he arose after everyone had gone asleep and made his way towards the second Wilson's room. Again passing through a maze, he "stole through a wilderness of narrow passages" (Q, I, 284). And as the narrator of the later tale, "The Tell-Tale Heart," he, too, carried a "lamp, with a shade over it" and cast the light upon the second Wilson's "countenance." However, there is no description of the face of the second Wilson as there is of the old man's vulture-like eye. Instead, Wilson's account suggests that for the first time he saw the second Wilson as really a part of himself. He says, "a numbness, an iciness of feeling instantly pervaded my frame. . . . I gazed;--while my brain reeled with a multitude of incoherent thoughts" (Q, I, 284-85, Poe's italics). As if gazing ("I gazed") into an abyss as do many other of Poe's heroes, Wilson also suffers from the vertigo of Perverseness ("my brain reeled") that results from the confrontation between the will, the impulse to do that which the individual does not want to do, to throw himself into the abyss, and the reason which causes him to hesitate on the brink of the precipice. But as in the case of the extended metaphor of the abyss in "The Imp of the Perverse," when the struggle between the

Perverse force and reason begins, man is doomed; when the two forces within Wilson, the will and the reason, externalized as the two William Wilsons, confront each other, Wilson's destruction is assured. In a frenzy Wilson flees the school and his double, the restraint of reason, and begins the plunge into the abyss of self-destruction.

Wilson tells of returning home for a short time and then later becoming a student at Eton. In this new school he is free of the discipline of Dr. Bransby and the interference of Wilson; he is able to hide himself for a while in thoughtless fancy, the capricious reverie he indulged in while restrained by the iron door and "massy walls" of Dr. Bransby's academy. Away from the maze of reason and from the second William Wilson, he plunged into the abyss of fancy to further escape the last horrifying experience at the school. (In this last instance Poe does clearly employ the image in the manner Wilbur describes--that is, as representing a state of reverie.) Wilson recalls, "the vortex of thoughtless folly into which I there so immediately and so recklessly plunged, washed away all but the froth of my past hours, ingulfed at once every solid or serious impression, and left to memory only the veriest levities of a former existence" (Q, I, 285, italics added).

While at Eton, William Wilson again defied "the laws," "eluded the vigilance of the institution." In his third year of folly, he one night as usual invited his fellow "students to a secret carousal" (Q, I, 285) in his room. In the midst of the debauchry, a visitor

interrupted the party and asked to converse with him. In "the vestibule of the building," the man seized Wilson by the arm and "with a gesture of petulant impatience, whispered the words 'William Wilson' in his ear" (Q, I, 286). Wilson wasted little time in renewing his flight from his namesake. But each new attempt at hiding from the second Wilson only ended in futility. His wanderings "to the very ends of the earth" (Q, I, 290) became even more maze-like than before as he ran from the second Wilson. He attempted to escape from the other Wilson's "impertinent supervision" of and "impervious dominion"<sup>6</sup> over his will (Q, I, 290, italics added). He eventually discovered, however, that no exit from the maze existed, that each seeming avenue of escape led to an eventual confrontation with the other Wilson.

<sup>6</sup>It is certainly impossible to determine whether Poe intended the initial three letters (imp) of these words to be associated with the later imp of the Perverse. However, it is interesting enough to note that he is consistent in using words built upon this prefix when he has Wilson speak of the second Wilson. Besides those in italics above, others are "he . . . , with a gesture of petulant impatience, whispered the words 'William Wilson' in my ears" (286); "the hated and dreaded rival at Dr. Bransby's? Impossible!" (290); "the sentiment of deep awe [over the second Wilson] had operated, hitherto, to impress me with an idea of my own utter weakness and helplessness, and to suggest an implicit, although bitterly reluctant submission to his arbitrary will. . . . wine . . . rendered me more impatient of control" (290-91). If these examples only appear coincidental, an examination of the extended metaphor of the abyss in "The Imp of the Abyss" discloses the same repetition of the prefix "imp." The narrator describes the "imp" of the Perverse as an "impulse" and as being "imperceptible" (Q, II, 639); he says that he "impetuously approaches it (the abyss), that "there is no passion in nature so demoniacally impatient" (640, italics added throughout footnote).

With this realization, however, came "the inspiration of a burning hope, . . . a stern and desperate resolution that he would submit no longer to be enslaved" (Q, I, 291). At a carnival in Rome, Wilson, in pursuit of a woman, "forced his way through the mazes (Q, I, 291, italics added) of people, only to confront once again the second Wilson. Moments later in a small room, he struggled with his double and fatally wounded him. For a moment his attention was distracted; when he glanced back, he saw reflected in a mirror only himself "all pale and dabbled in blood" (Q, I, 292).

In this last confrontation of the two Wilsons, Poe skillfully associates again Wilson's flight from the second Wilson with the image of the maze. When Wilson "plunged" his "sword" (the verb "plunged" is an appropriate one echoing back to Wilson's earlier statements of his unprecedented fall and of the "vortex" of "thoughtless folly" into which he "plunged") into the "bosom" (Q, I, 291) of the second Wilson, he destroyed himself. The dying second Wilson's final words are "how utterly thou hast murdered thyself" (Q, I, 292, Poe's italics).

Wilson's "suicide" is an acting out of the destruction of his conscience, his intellect, by the impulse of his overriding will. When Wilson killed his self, he acted also in a rage against the discipline of Dr. Bransby's academy--personified in the martinet, in the iron bolts, and in the "massy walls"--and also against the necessity of his labyrinthine-like flight from Wilson, the flight from Reason.

As much a controversy exists over "Ligeia" as over "William Wilson." Early critics tried to read the tale on the literal level, which inevitably led to an analysis of Poe's psychological problems instead of the tale itself. Then with some success later critics, especially Richard Wilbur, read the tale as an allegory. Wilbur sees the Lady Ligeia as the supernal beauty which Poe desired to glimpse, while Rowena--antipodal to Ligeia--is "earthly, physical beauty which tempts the poet's passions."<sup>7</sup> Yet when "Ligeia" is read along side "William Wilson" and "The House of Usher," the tale and its characters--definitely allegorical ones--take on completely different meanings. In "Ligeia" as in "Usher" and "Wilson," Poe is also concerned with the power of an evil volition ("evil propensity"); this time, however, the will of the narrator and his reason are externalized as the two female characters. Ligeia and Rowena are projections of the narrator's personality--with Ligeia as the willful passion and Rowena as reason. Ligeia is the narrator's impulse for self-destruction, whereas Rowena is the narrator's rational faculties which in the tale for the last time futilely attempt to rescue the narrator from the fall into the abyss.

The opening lines of the tale set the mood for this allegorical reading. In them are suggestions of the narrator's uncertainty about the origin of his acquaintance with Ligeia and also indications of

<sup>7</sup>Wilbur, p. 117.

his fanciful invention of Ligeia. The narrator is unable to recall "when" or "where" he "first became acquainted with the Lady Ligeia" (Q, I, 222). He says "her singular yet placid cast of beauty and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language, made their way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthy progressive, that they have been unnoticed and unknown" (Q, I, 222). "I believe," he says, "I met her first and most frequently in some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine." And "of her family--I have surely heard her speak." And as if he felt these first remarks unfounded, he says, "that it is of a remotely ancient date cannot be doubted" (Q, I, 222, italics added). The tone of the passage up to this point is one of uncertainty; and the more the narrator continues in his efforts to establish Ligeia as a real, tangible person, the more her nonexistence becomes the reality.

The fanciful origin of this dark lady is clearly established as the narrator continues. He says, "buried in studies of a nature more than all else adapted to deaden impressions of the outward world, it is by that sweet word alone--by Ligeia--that I bring before mine eyes in fancy the image of her who is no more." The phrase "deaden impressions" echoes back to his early statement about first meeting Ligeia "in some large, old decaying city near the Rhine" (Q, I, 222, italics added). The external world is lifeless to the narrator; he has turned within his self and has, as William Wilson, also become the victim of the capriciousness of fancy. To summon the phantom of



his diseased mind, he had simply to whisper the word "Ligeia." The narrator, in his initial hope to establish credibility, expects his reader to believe that his "studies" (Q, I, 222) are stimulated by Ligeia's death; but he begs the question, the question of whether or not Ligeia ever existed. On the contrary, Ligeia--the willful passion of self-destruction--is the result of his "studies," the Faustian search for "a wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden" (Q, I, 225).

Although Ligeia is only a fabrication of the narrator's diseased mind, she must die--or, at least, be eclipsed by the antithesis of what she represents. Thus, Poe implements the allegory with the death of Ligeia and the inclusion of Rowena as the narrator's second bride. Whether Rowena be a real woman or again only a phantom of the narrator's mind is really of little importance, for either way she represents a reality, which the narrator finally denies in his madness.

After the death of Ligeia, the narrator left his "dwelling in the dim old decaying city by the Rhine" and then "purchased and put in some repair, an abbey . . . in one of the wildest and least frequented portions of fair England" (Q, I, 228). Poe is skillful in his allegory to have two houses, two minds, one in which the narrator lived with Ligeia (passion) and the other, with Rowena (reason). In redecorating the abbey "with a child-like perversity," he prepared, for "the successor of the unforgotten Ligeia," "one chamber" to resemble a tomb (Q, I, 228). "The bridal couch," he

says, was "sculptured of solid ebony, with a pall-like canopy above. In each of the angles of the chamber stood on end a gigantic sarcophagus of black granite" (Q, I, 229). The "bridal chamber," as all descriptions of rooms in Poe's works, is a projection of the narrator's mind; hence, the setting establishes the denial or death of Rowena so that the narrator can eventually reclaim, and be reclaimed by, Ligeia. "In a bridal chamber such as this," he says, "I passed, with the Lady of Tremaine, the unhallowed hours of the first month of our marriage." She grew to hate him: "she shunned me, and loved me but little," he recalls; "but it gave me rather pleasure than otherwise. I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man. My memory flew back . . . to Ligeia" (Q, I, 229). As the narrator continues in his fantasies to reclaim Ligeia, life fades from Rowena.

At "the commencement of the second month of the marriage," Lady Rowena grew sick; the narrator says, "she spoke of sounds, and of motions, in and about the chamber of the turret, which I concluded had no origin save in the distemper of her fancy." Her illness was short-lived; however, once well, "a second more violent disorder again threw her upon a bed of suffering." Rowena "spoke . . . of the sounds--of the slight sounds--and of the unusual motions among the tapestries" in the bridal room. Her husband, eager to dispell the "sounds" and "motions" as mere delusions, explained that they "were but the natural effects of that customary rushing of the wind" (Q, I, 230). But shortly after his attempt to reassure her, he, too, perceived their

presence. Then, he saw "fall within the goblet" from which Rowena drank "three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid" (Q, I, 231). At this point in the tale, Ligeia's power comes back into focus; consequently, the dark lady, in rendering Rowena helpless, begins to lure the narrator to his inevitable self-destruction.

The narrator, awaiting Rowena's death, then recalls a series of visions and memories which all culminate in his final self-disintegration. He says, "wild visions . . . flitted, shadow like, before me." "Then rushed upon me a thousand memories of Ligeia" (Q, I, 231). Again later he "gave himself up to passionate waking visions of Ligeia." His "reason wandered." "And again" he "sunk into visions of Ligeia" (Q, I, 232). He became "a helpless prey to a whirl of violent emotions." And finally, he realized "there was a mad disorder in his thoughts--a tumult unappeasable" (Q, I, 233). The more he hearkened back to Ligeia, the closer Rowena approached death. His attempts at helping Rowena in her sickness were fruitless at calling "back the spirit still hovering" (Q, I, 232). Until at last while still staring at Rowena, he saw that her body changed--first, her size, then, her hair, and finally, her eyes. "'Here then, at least,'" he says, "I shrieked aloud, 'can I never--can I never be mistaken--these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes--of my lost love--of the Lady--of the Lady Ligeia'" (Q, I, 233). With the identification of the eyes, his total disintegration is realized.

The allegorical tale ends here--a full circle, from Ligeia's domination of the narrator, to the death of Ligeia, to the narrator's marriage with Rowena, and to her subsequent death and Ligeia's rebirth. However, one element of the tale still remains to be discussed. The final image of recognition, Ligeia's eyes, receives more attention from Poe than any other element in the tale, indeed, even a longer descriptive passage than the tomb-like interior of the abbey. In another tale, "Morella," written before "Ligeia" and having a similar sequence of events, the narrator speaks of the heroine's eyes. "I met the glance," he says, "of her meaning eyes, and then my soul sickened and became giddy with the giddiness of one who gazes downward into some dreary and unfathomable abyss" (Q, I, 153). Morella's eyes, as pointed out in Chapter One, are an abyss into which the narrator stares and becomes dizzy. Later, this dizziness and abyss image in the tale "The Imp of the Perverse" become part of the metaphor that Poe uses to explain Perverseness. In the tale "Ligeia" the narrator describes Ligeia's eyes as abyss-like, and as a deep well in which truth is to be found. He struggles to find a comparable prototype; however, none exists. "For eyes," he says, "we have no models in the remotely antique." "They were . . . far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race. They were even fuller than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad." This characteristic of Ligeia's eyes is only noticeable "in moments of intense excitement." And then "at such moments . . . her beauty was the beauty of beings

either above or part from the earth--the beauty of the fabulous Hourri of the Turk." Not only the size and the unearthliness but also the color is abyss-like. "The hue of the orbs," the narrator says, "was the most brilliant of black" (Q, I, 223).

The eyes obsess the narrator; they attract his spiritual and physical being as if he were being hypnotized. He says,

the expression of the eyes of Ligeia! How for long hours have I pondered upon it! How have I, through the whole of a midsummer night, struggled to fathom it! What was it--that something more profound than the well of Democritus--which lay far within the pupils of the eyes of my beloved. What was it? I was possessed with a passion to discover. Those eyes! those large, those shining, those divine orbs! they became to me twin stars of Leda, and I to them devoutest of astrologers (Q, I, 224).

Ligeia's eyes possess a magnetic quality like that which has often been attributed to the eye in visual art. Gerald Eager, in his discussion of contemporary art, establishes three characteristics of the eye: "its passive sending power (the use of the eye to examine), its active sending power (the use of the eye to influence), and its positive receiving character (the sensitivity of the eye)."<sup>8</sup> Ligeia's eyes are of the second type--"active sending power." Eager says that in art "the strong focus of the [active sending eye] is suggested by exaggerating its size and by aiming it directly at the viewer." The power of the eyes is so strong that "the viewer's attention is not

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Eager, "The Missing and Mutilated Eye in Contemporary Art," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, XX (Fall, 1961), 51.

allowed to spread evenly over the face . . . , but is always drawn back to the eyes by their size and self-sufficient strength."<sup>9</sup>

Ligeia's eyes--immense and attractive--are like a threshold which promises a truth ("well of Democritus"), but at the same time offers only self-destruction through those same eyes. Ligeia symbolizes that passion of the narrator's personality that wills the overthrow of reason and thus the disintegration of the self. The eyes of Ligeia appear as a mask or projection of the narrator's personality. When he "peered into the large eyes of Ligeia" (Q, I, 223), the narrator saw that "she, the outwardly calm, the everplacid Ligeia, was the most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion. And of such passion," he says, "I could form no estimate, save by the miraculous expansion of those eyes which at once so delighted and appalled me" (Q, I, 225, italics added). Hence, as is true of the narrators of "The Imp of the Perverse" and "Morella," the narrator of "Ligeia" also stares into an abyss-like eye and becomes subject to the impulse of self-destruction. At the end of the tale--the moment Ligeia claims Rowena's body--the narrator once again falls subject to "the full, and the black, and the wild eyes . . . of the Lady Ligeia" (Q, I, 233).

In "The Fall of the House of Usher" as in "Wilson" and "Ligeia," the same dialectical struggle takes place in the form of an allegory

<sup>9</sup>Eager, p. 53.

between reason and passion.<sup>10</sup> Roderick Usher in the allegory represents the mind, the psyche; Madeline, as the first three letters of her name suggest, represents a maddening influence or passion which threatens Roderick; and the narrator of the tale in his attempt to save Roderick from self-destruction may be considered as reason, especially since Roderick wrote asking his friend for help. As Wilbur points out, "the House of Usher is, in allegorical fact, the physical body of Roderick Usher."<sup>11</sup> Thus, within Roderick's house or mind, the struggle between passion and reason takes place.

However, Wilbur sees the state of the House of Usher at the beginning of the tale as the result, the conclusion of a struggle-- what he calls the "civil war in the palace of the mind." In explaining the nature of this struggle, Wilbur says that at the end of childhood the "consciousness is more and more invaded by the corrupt and corrupting external world: it succumbs to passion, it develops a

<sup>10</sup>Davidson, pp. 195-97, has a similar analysis of "Usher." His is based on the popular psychology of Poe's day, that is, Andrew Combe's and Spurzheim's "psychology of the tripartite organization and functioning of man." In this system, the normal human being has all three elements of his being--body, mind, and spirit--in harmony; however, when one element dominates the others, a functional or organic disease results. Davidson says that such an imbalance exists in Roderick Usher. "Usher represents," Davidson says, "the mind or intellectual aspect of the total being"; and "Madeline is the sensual or physical side of this psyche." Both Roderick and Madeline compose the "spirit." The basic difference between Davidson's analysis and the one above is that Davidson does not take into account the narrator and the important role that he shares in the struggle between reason and passion.

<sup>11</sup>Wilbur, p. 107.

conscience, it makes concessions to reason and to objective fact." The result is the discovery by the imagination that, because of the conflict between reason and passion, it is "no longer able to possess the world through a serene solipsism; it [thus] strives to annihilate the outer world by turning in upon itself; it flees into irrationality and dream; and all its dreams are efforts both to recall and to simulate its primal, unfallen state," that state of childhood "when all things [were] viewed with a tyrannical and unchallenged subjectivity."<sup>12</sup> In other words, the mind, in wanting to regain the fantasies of childhood and to deny the objective, factual world of adults--the world in which passion wars with reason--seeks a refuge in reverie, the hypnagogic state. For Wilbur the struggle among reason and passion and imagination ends before the tale starts, and he sees the story itself as a dream of the narrator's in which he "journeys inward toward his moi intérieur, toward his inner and spiritual self." In Wilbur's allegorical scheme, the figures are the narrator, who is dreaming, and Roderick, who represents the "narrator's imagination" and the "hypnagogic state."<sup>13</sup> Wilbur does not mention Madeline--certainly a character of some importance in the tale.

But another level of allegory other than Wilbur's exists in the tale. If the narrator represents reason and if Roderick in his house

<sup>12</sup>Wilbur, p. 107.

<sup>13</sup>Wilbur, p. 108.



(mind) is struggling with Madeline (passion), then Roderick appropriately summons the narrator (reason) to the House of Usher. "With the first glimpse of the building," the narrator says, "a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit." The narrator's first "glimpse" of the prospect is of Usher's physical disintegration. As Davidson points out, Poe "presented a number of protagonists who would not only go mad but who would, all the while, be aware that they were going mad."<sup>14</sup> Thus when the narrator (reason) views the house (mind), in actuality Usher observes his own physical and mental disintegration. Again the narrator looks "upon the scene before him--upon the mere house, and the simple landscape feature of the domain--upon the bleak walls--upon the vacant eye-like windows" (Q, I, 263).

This second time the narrator closely examines the externals of the house; but then he looks into the tarn in which the house is reflected and sees the internals--Usher's mental state. He says, "I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down--but with a shudder even more thrilling than before--upon the remodeled and inverted images." As the narrator peers into the abyss-like pool, he prophetically glimpses in the "remodelled and inverted images" the eventual inversion of Usher's mind into madness. With this prospect in mind--both the future probability and the scene before him--the

<sup>14</sup>Edward Davidson, "Introduction," to Selected Works of Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956), xv.

narrator perversely decides to stay; he says, "nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks." As reason, the narrator responds to Usher's letter, his plea for help. In the letter Usher wrote of an "acute bodily illness--of a mental disorder which oppressed him--and of an earnest desire to see [the narrator] with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of [his] society, some alleviation of his malady" (Q, I, 263). Thus, the contents of the letter (Usher spoke of a "bodily illness" and "a mental disorder") become a reality for the narrator when he looks at the decaying house (body) and then at its reflection (mind) in the tarn.

Recalling that the "sole effect" of looking into the tarn "had been to deepen the first singular impression," he "again uplifted [his] eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool [;] there grew in [his] mind a strange fancy." He speaks of a "vivid force of . . . sensations which oppressed" him. In explanation, he says, "I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity--an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn--a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible and leaden-hued" (Q, I, 264).

Once again what "oppresses" Usher also has the same effect on the narrator. Usher's reason, attempting to maintain a delicate balance between itself and passion (the Perverse delight of self-destruction), is temporarily affected by a "vivid force of sensations" and the beginnings of an overworked "imagination"--all of which are embodied in the "pestilent and mystic vapor" rising from the tarn. The narrator--as reason demanding a logical answer--does not understand the cause of the oppression and at best can only label the feeling as a "superstition." "Shaking off from my spirit what must (Poe's italics) have been a dream," he says, "I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building" (Q, I, 264, italics added). The reason, to avoid falling into the subjectivity of sleep ("dream"), reawakens its faculties so that it can objectify its analysis of the house (Usher). For the first time since his "First glimpse," the narrator describes the building in the most objective language in the tale. He says,

its principal feature seemed to be that of an 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 still 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 woodwork which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air (Q, I, 264-65).

Continuing his objective analysis, but also touching upon the metaphorical quality of the house, the narrator says, "perhaps the

eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zig-zag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn" (Q, I, 265). The "fissure" in the house, extending from the "roof" to the "tarn," indicates the two halves of and split in Usher's mind, his struggle between reason and passion; it also ends in the tarn, foreshadowing Usher's eventual fall into madness, his inability to ward off the impulse to leap into the abyss-like tarn.

Once the narrator is within the house--within Usher's mind--his observations are the same as those he made of the outside of the house. "I felt," he says, "that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all" (Q, I, 265). His "first glimpse" of the house was "of insufferable gloom" (Q, I, 263); and as the "mystic vapor" (Q, I, 264) rising from the tarn, the "gloom" is also an "air" which is "stern" and "deep" and which hangs "over and pervaded all" (Q, I, 265).

The narrator's description of Usher is also similar to that of the house. As he surveys the bodily characteristics of his childhood friend, the narrator says, "a cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very palid; . . . hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity--these features . . . made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten" (Q, I, 266). Each characteristic finds itself

associated with the house outside; but one in particular even for the narrator--"the new miraculous lustre of the eye," the narrator says, "above all things startled and even awed me"--is the most conspicuous. The image of the "eye large, liquid and luminous beyond comparison" certainly echoes back to the image of the tarn in the gloomy landscape of the outside.

Usher's eyes are different from Ligeia's in that they absorb the viewer, whereas hers hold the viewer, hypnotize him, act upon him. Ligeia's eyes are of a stern passion; however, Usher's, representing his state of mind, are passive, are in themselves acted upon and vulnerable, easily accessible. Eager, in his discussion of the eye in art, speaks of an eye ("positive receiving character") similar to Usher's. He writes, "the shiny wetness of the  $\sqrt{\text{positive receiving character}}$ " makes the eye seem as receptive as a pool and as easily penetrated as a piece of glass, suggesting immediate absorption and reaction to impressions."<sup>15</sup> Usher has peered into the abyss (the tarn) for so long that the abyss begins to peer back at him; the element of madness found in the landscape rests in his soul (the eye is usually considered the window of the soul).

Usher, in explaining "the nature of his malady," speaks of "a morbid acuteness of the senses," "a mere nervous affection," "a family evil and one for which he despaired to find a remedy" (Q, I, 266).

<sup>15</sup>Eager, p. 54.

He says, "'I must perish in this deplorable folly. . . . I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, Fear'" (Poe's italics). In folly (the absence of reason--he says he "must abandon life and reason") he will perish. Perhaps such a statement is not so prophetic coming from Usher himself, for he appears to know exactly what is taking place outside the house as well as in it. As suggested earlier, he does observe himself going mad. He also admits, the narrator says, "that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin--to the severe and long--continued illness--indeed to the evidently approaching dissolution--of a tenderly beloved sister" (Q, I, 267).

For the first time, the narrator as well as Usher refers to Madeline directly--directly because what she represents (madness--passion) has been indirectly referred to up to this point in the tale, that is, the decayed and gloomy state of the house of Usher. While Usher is describing Madeline's condition, Madeline herself "passed through a remote portion of the apartment." The narrator says, "I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread; and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings. A sensation of stupor oppressed me as my eyes followed her retreating steps" (Q, I, 267, italics added). At this point Poe is subtly associating the effect Madeline has on the narrator with the effect that the house and the tarn and the "mystic vapor" had upon him. He

is linking Madeline with the motif of decay (house) and madness (tarn).<sup>16</sup>

Usher and the narrator suppress the event and do not speak of Madeline. "For several days ensuing," the narrator says, "her name was unmentioned by either Usher or myself; and during this period I was busied in earnest endeavors to alleviate the melancholy of my friend" (Q, I, 268). The narrator, as reason, tries to penetrate Usher's mind; he says, "a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit." However, the narrator entertains the same feelings of futility as he did while looking at the gloomy landscape outside: "The more bitterly did I perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe in one unceasing radiation of gloom" (Q, I, 268). Part of Usher's therapy--for the narrator attends him as if he were a psychiatrist, reason helping a person with a mental disorder--is to paint and at times to sing while accompanying himself on the guitar. Listening to Usher sing several verses of "The Haunted Palace," the narrator says, "I fancied that I perceived, and for the first time, a full consciousness on the part

<sup>16</sup>Poe achieves this analogy through word repetition. The italicized words above echo back to such phrases as--used in describing the house and the tarn--"mental disorder . . . oppressed" Usher (263), "the sensations which oppressed me" (264), "mystic vapor, dull, sluggish" (264), "mystery all insoluble" (263), and "was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion" (263).

of Usher of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne" (Q, I, 269, italics added). Again, the narrator foreshadows Usher's eventual doom. In his observation there is the suggestion of the final catastrophe, the fall of the House of Usher; the unstable mind of Usher falls from its "throne" into the madness of the "tarn" below.

Usher, primarily noncommittal and passive up to this point in the tale, breaks the silence and speaks again of Madeline. The narrator recalls that Usher "informed" him "abruptly that the Lady Madeline was no more." "He stated," the narrator says, "his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight . . . in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building." The almost non sequitur in Usher's actions and his rationale for entombing Madeline are wholly unacceptable to the narrator; nevertheless, he says, "the wordly reason . . . assigned for this singular proceeding, was one which I did not feel at liberty to dispute." The narrator, as a part of Usher, helps his friend in "the temporary entombment"; "we [both reason and mind] two alone bore ["the corpse"] to its rest" (Q, I, 271). The vault in which Madeline is entombed lies "at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my [the narrator-reason] own sleeping apartment." Usher has acted--paradoxically so--because he knows that he cannot win out against Madeline's threats. By entombing his sister, he hopes, although futilely, to remove her influence from himself. The premature burial of his twin only points out his ironic attempt to avoid his own physical



and mental destruction: he hopes by burying alive his other self-- that impulse of self destruction--that he will preserve his own life. Reason helps him at his task. It is quite appropriate also that Madeline be entombed "at great depth" close by the narrator's "sleeping" quarters. Poe is suggesting that Usher is suppressing in the unconscious mind (sleep, below reason) his impulse to leap into the tarn.

After the narrator and Usher put Madeline to rest, the two move to the "less gloomy apartment of the upper portion of the house." Within a few days, the narrator observes a marked difference in Usher's "mental disorder." "He roamed," the narrator says, "from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. . . . his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret. . . . I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours." Usher's mental condition is so striking that, the narrator says, "it infected me. I felt creeping upon me . . . the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions" (Q, I, 272).

Still under the influence of Usher's mental disorder, that night while in bed the narrator "struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me" (*italics added*). Again the narrator's comment is as much Usher's as his own: both, since they are one, struggle alike. The narrator lay "peering earnestly within the intense darkness of the chamber." As he peers into the abyss (the unconscious), he searches for the origin of the fear. Then, someone,

he says, "rapped, with a gentle touch, at my door and entered, bearing a lamp." Usher stood before him with a "mad hilarity in his eyes" (Q, I, 273). The two men staring at each other are similar to Wilson's looking into the countenance of the second Wilson. In both instances the scene takes place at night in one of the character's sleeping quarters (appropriately so because at night the subconscious mind rules over the conscious, rational faculties), a character carries a lamp, and self recognition takes place. Poe is pointing out, as he has from the very first scene, that Usher's reason is slowly succumbing to Madeline's influence. The self-recognition and introspection on Usher's part are also intensified in the fact that his "luminous eyes" have gone out, that he gazes "upon vacancy for long hours" (Q, I, 272). He has turned within to contemplate the inevitable end that he must confront.

Outside a tempest rages (symbolic of Usher's mental disorder); "a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation . . . hung about and enshrouded the mansion." The narrator (reason), hoping to calm Usher, gives a factual-objective explanation for the disturbance. "These appearances," he says, "which bewilder you, are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon." Still attempting to help Usher maintain his composure, he reads to him. However, the tale of the "Mad Trist" only echoes the disturbances in Usher's mind. Usher sat, while listening to the narrator read the tale, with "his eyes . . . bent fixedly before him." The two characters and their actions (reading and

contemplation) demonstrate in one mind (Usher's) that multiple levels of cognition are taking place, in other words, that both reason and passion (impulse for self-destruction) are at war with each other.

Usher, jumps to his feet, addresses the narrator (himself): "Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!" (Poe's italics).

At that exact moment, out of "the huge antique panels," "the ponderous and ebony jaws" came Madeline from the depths of her premature grave, the abyss. She "fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final depth-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated" (Q, I, 276).

As Usher falls prey to madness, reason departs. The narrator in horror "from that chamber, and from that mansion, . . . fled aghast." As he runs across "the old cause way," he turns and glimpses "the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely-discernible fissure." "While I gazed," he says, "this fissure rapidly widened--there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind--the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight--my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder" (Q, I, 277). Madeline's falling on Usher and consequently Usher's fall are paralleled with the fall of the house. Thus, passion-madness wins out over reason.

Certainly, a question exists about why Poe has the narrator escape. The most obvious answer is that someone had to relate the narrative. However, another explanation exists; Poe prepares his

reader for the narrator's exit from the house, when Usher earlier tells the narrator that he "'must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, Fear'" (Q, I, 267). When Usher dies he does so in madness--in Madeline's arms. Thus, he "abandon[s] life and reason [the narrator] together."

Madeline or the impulse of self-destruction, to overpower Usher (the mind), must as pointed out overcome the narrator or reason. The narrator does succumb to her influence; he speaks of a vertigo in his brain ("my brain reeled") as he "gazed" at the whirlwind which caused the "mighty walls" to rush "asunder." And before Madeline falls on Usher, the narrator says, "she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold," the threshold to the abyss. And also while Madeline is entombed a tempest rages outside causing a "whirlwind." These abyss-like images contribute not only to the structural unity of the tale but also to the relationships among the characters in the allegory. Poe associates Madeline (madness) figuratively with the abyss; she reels, whirls like the whirlwind. She, as pointed out, has an effect upon reason; thus the narrator suffers from vertigo--a reeling, whirling of the mind, a sense of falling. The narrator becomes impotent and unable to help Usher. The whirlwind of the tempest is the same whirlwind which causes the house to fall: Madeline, who was reeling to and fro, is a maddening vortex also causing Usher (the house) to fall into the abyss-like tarn below.

After a close reading demonstrating the conflict between reason and passion in the three tales--"Ligeia," "Usher," and "Wilson"--it is now possible to associate these three early tales with the compulsive-confession tales discussed in Chapter One. The most obvious similarity is that all the heroes fall to either mental or physical destruction. Upon closer examination, however, these early tales share even a more subtle relationship with the compulsive-confession tales than merely a common end. Actually, they are another of Poe's attempts to define the Perverse world his hero inhabits. As stated earlier in the discussion of the tale "The Imp of the Perverse," the unknown force that Poe calls the imp (impulse) of the Perverse may be illustrated with the principle of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. The first two elements of the principle--the duality of thesis and antithesis--are of primary importance in understanding the demonic force which compells the majority of Poe's heroes. The "thesis" is the narrator's impulse (passion) or idea of what it would be like to fall. Alone, the feeling is harmless. However, when the reason or "antithesis" attempts to control the impulse or "thesis," then the impulse to feel the sensation of falling dominates the reason making it impotent and causing the narrator to leap to his self-destruction. And, thus, to leap into the abyss is to pass over into the synthesis. The extended metaphor in "The Imp" is composed of a number of images, essentially the precipice with a man on its edge staring down into the abyss. The man on the edge, with whom the narrator associates himself, experiences

the antithetical tension between passion and reason. The idea of the man's impulse to feel the sensation of what it would be like to leap into the abyss evolves in the extended metaphor from the image of a cloud into that of a demon (imp). Thus, this last series of images in the extended metaphor in the tale "The Imp" and the idea they represent move from an undefinable urge to an image of a cloud which eventually forms into an imp or demon and finally complete the circle in the narrative of the extended metaphor with the word impulse, linking the image and the idea (Q, II, 639-40).

The principle of thesis-antithesis, as reflected in the abyss metaphor and Poe's concept of Perverseness, is not related to the compulsive-confession tales only, but also as suggested has implications for other tales in which a Poe hero is destroyed, in particular, "Ligeia," "Usher," and "Wilson." The real difference is that in these three tales Poe externalizes his heroes' psychological struggle, whereas in the later compulsive-confession tales he employs the abyss metaphor to illustrate an internal struggle. Along with this one main difference, striking parallels exist. As the hero in compulsive-confession tales is destroyed by the imp in the abyss, Usher and Wilson and the narrator of Ligeia are also pursued and eventually destroyed by a phantasm; for them the demonic force is defined not with the image of an imp but with the motif of the Double. However, the image of the imp of the abyss differs little from the theme of the Double; in fact, tales of the Double are tales of Perverseness. The single

difference is that the forces usually externalized in the tales of the Double ("Ligeia," "Usher," and "Wilson") are completely internalized in the tales of Perverseness (compulsive-confession tales). The impulse (thesis)--in the metaphor of the abyss--is "the free, uninhibited, often criminal self," whereas the reason (antithesis) is "the socially acceptable or conventional personality."<sup>17</sup> Also, as is aptly drawn in Poe's tales of Perverseness, the single character with the Double personality is both criminal and prosecutor: he commits a crime and then punishes himself by confessing what had ironically been a perfect crime. Moreover, the tale of the Double, as the tale of Perverseness, may be explained structurally with the principle of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. In "Wilson" the duality of thesis-antithesis is personified in the two William Wilsons. And as in "The Imp" both "impulse" (thesis) and "reason" (antithesis) define William Wilson's existence. The first Wilson is suffering from an insatiable "will," which he defines as an "evil propensity"; this part of him is in conflict with his double which also serves as his conscience or reason. Thus, as the narrator of "The Imp," Wilson has a similar demonic impulse to sin and also calls upon his reason to control his urge or volition. In the tale the images of the imp and the abyss have been displaced: the imp becomes the overpowering "will" of the first Wilson and the abyss is associated

<sup>17</sup>These phrases are taken from Claire Rosenfield, "The Shadow Within: The Conscious and Unconscious Use of the Double," Daedalus, XCII (1963), 328.

with the images of the maze and the mirror. The completion of the triad or synthesis is realized when the first Wilson murders his double; thus, he falls to his self-destruction.

The same structure and relationship between characters are present in "Usher." Usher's twin sister, Madeline, is his Double. The conflict in the tale is defined, as in "Wilson," by the external struggle between the two. Madeline (thesis) represents the impulse for self-destruction, the imp; she is the "phantasm" that Usher fears (Q, I, 267). Usher attempts futilely to reason his way out of his problem. The narrator (antithesis) represents Usher's reason. Thus, both Madeline and the narrator represent the externalization of the inner conflict between passion and reason. At the end of the tale, Madeline, as the imp, climbs out of her tomb and vault and falls upon Usher; and the narrator flees the house (Roderick's mind), succumbing to Madeline's "oppressive" force--all of which ends when the house falls into the tarn (abyss).

In the tale "Ligeia" Poe utilizes the same principle, also externalizing the narrator's internal struggle. Ligeia (thesis), a fabrication of the narrator's uncontrollable imagination, is a personification of the imp and signifies the impulse for the disintegration of the self. On the other hand, the Lady Rowena (antithesis), the narrator's wife, represents reason, the attempt of the mind to maintain sanity. In this tale as in the others the images of the imp and the abyss have been displaced: the imp becomes Ligeia.



and the abyss becomes her eyes that the narrator discourses on and stares into at such length.

Thus, from "Ligeia" to "Usher" to "Wilson" and finally to "The Imp," Poe has progressively internalized his heroes' conflicts with reason and passion. In "Ligeia" both thesis-antithesis (the conflict) are externalized in Ligeia and the Lady Rowena, the black-haired and blond-haired heroines. Likewise, in "Usher" the externalization of the conflict works on two levels; Madeline is the external representation of the impulse for destruction with the narrator as reason, who comes to the mind and House of Usher. In "Wilson," however, only reason or conscience is completely externalized in the second Wilson, whereas the "will" is still embodied in and represented by the character himself. And finally in "The Imp" the struggle is completely internalized in and represented with the images of the imp and the abyss.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE VOYAGE INTO THE ABYSS

The Perverseness evident in the narrators of the compulsive-confession tales, William Wilson, Roderick Usher, and the narrator of "Ligeia" in every case arises from the conflict between reason and passion and results in the destruction of an individual man. But these tales give only a limited picture of the evolution of Poe's concept of Perverseness. In another group, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, "Ms. Found in a Bottle," "Descent into the Maelstrom," and "The Pit and the Pendulum," Poe examines Perverseness from a slightly different point of view. In these stories Poe sends characters on voyages into the abyss and uses their discoveries to present Perverseness as a universal phenomenon endemic to all men. Most of the characters in the voyage tales are able to withstand the confrontation with the abyss because Poe finds for his heroes a possible alternative to destruction. The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym is the most detailed of these stories in which a hero voyages into the abyss to encounter Perverseness.

Essentially, the critics view The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1837) in one of two ways: that either Poe's longest narrative is unified structurally and thematically and does have a serious meaning, or that it, at best, has only the semblance of a unifying theme and structure and Poe intended the novel not as a serious narrative but as a hoax.

Four critics who contend that the tale is unified and that it has a serious intent--Patrick F. Quinn, Edward H. Davidson, Pascal Covici, Jr., and James E. Cox--put forth arguments which are particularly significant to a discussion of Pym as it relates to Poe's development of the concept of Perverseness. All of these critics propose that the unity of the novel lies not in the narrative plot but in the symbolic structure. Quinn and Davidson contend that in the novel Poe is examining "the theme of deception" and the "pattern of revolt."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Patrick F. Quinn, The French Face of Edgar Poe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1957), pp. 176-77, 182-83; first printed in Hudson Review, IV (1951), 562-85. Edward H. Davidson, Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1969), pp. 158-61, 164-69. Also Harry Levin, in The Power of Blackness, Vintage Books (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 114, is in general agreement with Quinn and Davidson that Pym is unified. Those critics who see Pym as two stories held together by a transition are Sidney Kaplin, "Introduction to Pym," in Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert Regan, A Spectrum Book (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 149; and L. Moffitt Cecil, "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," Texas Studies in Language and Literature, V (Summer, 1963), 241. However, Sidney P. Moss in "A Conjecture Concerning the Writing of Arthur Gordon Pym," Studies in Short Fiction, IV (Fall, 1966), 84, says, "I doubt that the Kaplin-Cecil thesis is refutable, but I do believe that it might be qualified. The fact that 'Pym' is in effect two stories and not one was hardly Poe's intention; rather, I think, it was the consequence of a belated inspiration on his part." Also, see Moss' "Arthur Gordon Pym, or the Fallacy of Thematic Interpretation," University Review, XXXIII (Summer, 1967), 301-303. Those critics who see Pym as ununified are J. V. Ridgely and Iola S. Haverstick, "Chartless Voyage: The Many Narratives of Arthur Gordon Pym," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, VIII (Spring, 1966), 80. In defense of their conclusion, Ridgely and Haverstick argue, "The subtle readings of recent commentators [those above] depend upon emphasis on certain chosen elements at the expense of consideration of the whole text. . . . what Pym finally offers us is not mystery but mystification, not a problem for serious

The theme of deception, as pointed out by Quinn and Davidson, is of great importance in understanding how Pym exemplifies Poe's concept of Perverseness. In his examples Quinn points to at least three levels of deception which are particularly significant: those instances in which Pym deceives other people or others deceive him, in which Pym deceives himself, and in which he and others are deceived by nature. On the first two levels, the deception is intimately linked with the antithetical tension between reason and passion which interests Poe. Although Poe does not fully develop his third level of deception, that which Pym perceives in nature, it is, nevertheless, important not only because deception in nature furthers and sustains Pym's journey, but also because it reflects that Perverseness found in man.<sup>2</sup>

Covici and Cox, writing after Quinn and Davidson, develop the relationship between the theme of deception and Perverseness. Covici declares that Pym is not so much a character as he is a symbol for a manner of consciousness or what Covici calls a "mode of consciousness."<sup>3</sup> explication but an unsolvable puzzle, not complexity of meaning but meaningless complication. And yet, to offset these negative conclusions, we would also add that Pym remains of interest as a key to Poe's technique of craftsmanship as well as to a study of his development as a writer."

<sup>2</sup>Quinn, pp. 193-94, points out in passing the similarity between the metaphor of the abyss in both "The Imp of the Perverse" (Q, II, 639-40) and Pym (Q, II, 844-45) and says that Pym suffers from Perverseness.

<sup>3</sup>Pascal Covici, Jr., "Toward a Reading of Poe's Narrative of A. Gordon Pym," Mississippi Quarterly, XXI (Spring, 1968), 112.

Cox essentially agrees with Covici and points out that Pym's name "is clearly an anagram of Imp." He proposes that Pym's "only motive for launching himself toward the grand fantasy of a polar vortex is a perverse desire to go to sea, a desire which intensifies in proportion to the resistance it encounters."<sup>4</sup> This last phrase ("intensifies in proportion to the resistance it encounters") is closely linked with the theme of deception. Pym must deceive to fulfill his desire (impulse) and the more resistance (reason-authority) the greater the impulse for the Perverse. Thus, Covici and Cox supply the essential clue. Poe has Pym, as the Imp of the Perverse, as a symbol for a Perverse "mode of consciousness," voyage into the abyss to explore Perverseness, the impulse for self-destruction.

Throughout the novel, deception is manifested in the plot as a contrary action, unaccountable turns of events that shape, direct and distort the narrative of the story; what first appears as hope ends in despondency, what is thought to be obedience is disobedience, what appears as friendliness becomes treachery, and what is supposedly repulsive becomes in the end masochistically attractive. Or the opposite may occur: a malevolent effect becomes suddenly a benevolent one. In every case, however, the deception is a means through which Pym can explore Perverseness.

Poe immediately introduces the theme of deception and revolt and its connection with Perverseness in the first episode of the narrative

<sup>4</sup>James M. Cox, "Edgar Poe: Style as Pose," The Virginia Quarterly Review, XLIV (Winter, 1968), 73.

and thus clearly establishes the direction of the novel. Augustus, having become intoxicated, awakes in a state that has every appearance of sobriety, and suggests that he and Pym "go out on a frolic with the boat." This suggestion awakes in Pym, for the first time, an intense desire to experience Perverseness, for he says, "I can hardly tell what possessed me, but the words were no sooner out of his mouth than I felt a thrill of the greatest excitement and pleasure" (Q, II, 726).

Once at sea Pym perceives Augustus' pale countenance and nervous agitation and finally realizes, although too late, that his friend is in "a highly-concentrated state of intoxication--a state which, like madness, frequently enables the victim to imitate the outward demeanour of one in perfect possession of his senses" (Q, II, 727). As Augustus falls to the bottom of the boat in a stupor, Pym suddenly hears "a loud and long scream or yell" and loses consciousness. His next recollection is that of waking "in the cabin of a large whaling-ship (The Penguin)" (Q, II, 728), and being told that the crew--sailing toward Nantucket--fished him and Augustus from the sea. However, Pym discovers that the captain of The Penguin, after ramming their small skiff, had rescued them only because the crew threatened mutiny. Aboard The Penguin they return home just as Augustus' parents are rising for breakfast. Their appearance after such an experience arouses no one's attention, and Pym remarks, "Schoolboys . . . can accomplish wonders in the way of deception" (Q, II, 731).

Thus, in the first episode of the novel, Poe has carefully begun to develop the theme of deception. Augustus appears sober to Pym when in reality he is intoxicated. The captain of The Penguin is both destroyer and saviour; he rams their small skiff, and although he warmly receives the young men once they are aboard ship, he originally intended not to help them. Once the boys get back home, they go to breakfast as if they had just awakened when in reality they had earlier survived an almost inevitable death at sea. As school boys--especially Pym--their characterization as deceivers has only begun.

About a year and a half after Pym's and Augustus' incident at sea, a firm commissions Mr. Barnard--Augustus' father--to command a ship, The Grampus, on a whaling voyage. Augustus urges Pym to sign on, but Pym's family refuses to approve of such adventure. However, Pym's desire to go to sea supplants his family's wishes for him to remain home. "In pursuance of my scheme of deception," Pym says, "I was necessarily obliged to leave much to the management of Augustus." Augustus forges a note from a Mr. Ross--a relative of Pym's with whom he often spent several weeks at a time--requesting that Pym come for a visit. With his father's consent, Pym leaves not for Mr. Ross' home in New Bedford, but for a rendezvous with Augustus, who furthers the scheme of deception by furnishing Pym with "a thick seaman's cloak" for a disguise and by preparing a hiding place in the hold of the ship where Pym can stow away. As the two boys, under the cover of a "thick fog" (Q, II, 733) steal to the ship, they encounter Pym's

grandfather. Once again, Pym deceives: he tricks his grandfather into believing that this is a case of mistaken identity, that he is not his grandson, but rather some old ruffian of a sailor.

The motivation behind Pym's several deceptions of others is his Perverse longing for "visions . . . of shipwreck and famine [ , ] of death or captivity among barbarian hordes" (Q, II, 732) to become reality. When forces attempt to dissuade him or to prevent him from experiencing these Perverse dangers, the impulse for self-destruction becomes more intense and he must exercise deception so that he can begin his journey and the impulse can be satisfied.

In subsequent chapters--indeed to the last chapter of the novel--Poe continues to utilize this theme of deception and revolt. However, he begins to place less emphasis on Pym's deceptions of others and begins to focus instead on the ways in which Pym is himself the victim of deception. On the one hand, he is deceived by nature. A disparity often exists for Pym between the appearance of things and the reality behind appearance. On the other hand, Pym is the victim of his own self-deception. Unlike William Wilson and Roderick Usher, who experience an internal conflict between the impulse of the Perverse and the forces of reason, Pym avoids the conflict by repressing reason and by allowing Perverseness to rule his actions. But his self-deception does not allow him to recognize that reason has been repressed; therefore, he sees his actions as adventure or excitement but not as Perverseness.



Only once in the narrative does Pym directly and consciously experience the tension between reason and passion, the struggle which Usher and Wilson constantly confront and eventually succumb to. When Pym is trapped in the hold of the ship, he discovers that his provisions are exhausted. There remains only a "gill of liqueur," which he recklessly quaffs. And in "one of those fits of perverseness," he smashes the bottle to the floor (Q, II, 747). The breaking of the bottle is an irrational act. Reason would normally caution him to ration the last remains of the precious liquid; nevertheless, Perverseness or a fit of passion compels him to drink the bottle dry and then to smash it to the floor of the hold.

Although in this one instance of Perverseness Pym is not guilty of self-deception, the action is, nonetheless, an example of deception, that of the first sort, the deception by nature. The smashing of the bottle appears to Pym to be a self-destructive act, but in reality the sound of the crash of the bottle is what ultimately saves Pym's life, for Augustus hears it and realizes that Pym is still alive.

In this case the deception of nature works in Pym's favor; however, it does not always do so. When Pym, Augustus, Dirk Peters, and the other crewman, Parker, have overthrown the mutineers and have drifted for days without food or water, a ship at last comes in view. Pym thinks he sees a crewman on the ship "encouraging us," he says, "to have patience, nodding to us in a cheerful although rather odd way, and smiling constantly, so as to display a set of the most

brilliantly white teeth." But Pym soon discovers that all aboard the ship which was to rescue him and his companions had died of the plague, and that the "rather odd" smile of the crewman "encouraging" them is the result of a "carnivorous bird": "the eyes were gone, and the whole flesh around the mouth, leaving the teeth utterly naked." "This, then," he says, "was the smile which had cheered us on to hope!" (Q, II, 782-83). After the plague ship passes, the four men spot still another ship on the horizon. However, the "prospect of deliverance" (Q, II, 788) again ends in despair, for the vessel, although it appears to be moving toward them, is in reality moving away.

The second level of deception which Poe stresses in the narrative, self-deception, is more important because it is more closely linked with Perverseness. As stated earlier this self-deception occurs when Pym represses reason and unconsciously allows his Perverse desire to rule him, thus avoiding the conflict which destroys William Wilson and Roderick Usher. Indeed, it is this unconscious repression which allows Pym to experience the Perverse act of cannibalism. At first, Pym appears violently to oppose the idea of cannibalism. He threatens to throw Parker overboard "if he attempted in any manner to acquaint the others with his bloody and cannibal designs" (Q, II, 790). Pym even persuades the others to hold off for at least an hour until the fog lifts so that they might be able once again before carrying out their diabolical plans to search the horizon for a rescue ship. When none appears, the men "draw lots," and ironically Parker falls victim

to his own suggestion. The second day after the last of Parker's remains are consumed, Pym, who had "with extreme reluctance" (Q, II, 791) related the act of cannibalism, remembers the axe that he had put in a secure place before the storm. He says, "by getting at this axe, we might cut through the deck over the storeroom, and thus readily supply ourselves with provisions." In a short time, the three men chop into the deck and come up with a "small jar . . . full of olives," "a large ham and a bottle of Madeira wine" (Q, II, 793).

The fact that Parker never overtly makes the suggestion of cannibalism, but that Pym immediately understands his meaning indicates that Pym has at least unconsciously been thinking of the same thing. He says, "before [Parker] opened his lips my heart told me what he would say" (Q, II, 789). And then he protests too much: Pym fights Parker, convinces the others to wait an hour, hesitates to look at the straw he drew, and finally swoons. His impulse for the experience of cannibalism is gratified by his repression<sup>5</sup> of his knowledge of the axe that would, and eventually does, lead them to the food below the deck.

Pym's self-deception and his deception of others reveal the Perverseness of his personality, of his self. Unlike Roderick Usher and

<sup>5</sup>The use of the word "repression" is limited to mean a "thorough dismissal from consciousness" and differs from "suppression" which means a "voluntary refusal to act upon impulse." See Ruth Monroe, Schools of Psychoanalytic Thought (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955), p. 245. In other words, Pym has no conscious knowledge of the axe during the cannibalism episode; only later does he remember it.

William Wilson, however, Pym himself at no time comes to recognize his impulses as Perverse. His visions are focused on the delight of his actions and not on the meaning inherent in them. Because of his self-deception, the tension between reason and passion is not established and Pym does not experience the struggle which destroys Usher and Wilson. However, through Pym's Perverse impulses to act against reason, the reader as observer comes to understand Pym, the Imp. As Herbert Read quite succinctly puts it, in his Icon and Idea, "The self is a fluctuating element: it cannot be focused. . . . we therefore cannot know a self; we can only betray our self, and we do this, as the phrase indicates, fragmentarily and unconsciously" (Read's italics).<sup>6</sup> Thus, the reader comes to know Pym and what he represents in the way he exposes his "self," in the numerous ways he deceives and rebels against himself and others. He deceives his family and experiences cannibalism even though he represses such desires and holds others responsible: in the case of the deception of his family, he says that Augustus originated the idea and went as far as to forge the letter and to stow him away aboard The Grampus; and he says the idea of cannibalism is entirely Parker's. However, Pym, not Augustus and Parker, longs for "terrible moments of suffering and despair" and "en/visions . . . shipwreck and famine; . . . death

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Read, Icon and Idea: The Function of Art in the Development of Human Consciousness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 111.

or captivity among barbarian hordes" (Q, II, 732) as well as other grotesqueries--all of which he actively pursues throughout the narrative.

That Pym is at least unconsciously afraid to reveal himself is indicated in the "Preface," which is actually the last part of the novel Poe wrote. This preface to the narrative is of particular interest because it establishes a fictional point of view; in other words, the first part of the novel is fictionally alleged to be written by Poe, whereas the latter part is by Pym himself. Pym says in the "Preface"--also fictionally written by him--that friends urged him to give an account of his experiences in the South Seas. However, "I had several reasons," he writes, "for declining to do so, some of which were of a nature altogether private and concern no person but myself; others not so much so" (Q, II, 723). These "others" are detailed for the reader, but Pym never again mentions those "altogether private."

But Poe makes clear that the first part of the narrative--to the encounter with the Jane Guy--is more of a direct revelation of Pym's character than the latter half. Poe presents the first part as a biographical account of Pym's adventures recorded by a "Mr. Poe," (Q, II, 724) and uses this point of view to capture for the reader the Perversity in Pym's experiences. Then Poe has Pym conclude that because the public accepts the adventures as true, he himself can write the second half, from the introduction of the Jane Guy to the

conclusion. In contrast to the first, little, if any, intimate insights into Pym's personality exist in this second part supposedly written by Pym. Poe has Pym become, as he relates his discoveries on paper, objective and ratiocinative (for example, he gives a naturalistic account of the geography and animals near the pole, his narrative moves to the form of a journal, and he presents his reader with numerous puzzles to decipher--all of which take the focus of the narrative off of him and direct it towards external affairs.).

Although in this second section Pym also suffers from unaccountable impulses to vex himself, he still does not recognize that his actions are the result of Perverseness; he can only present this Perverseness that motivates him figuratively through the metaphor of the abyss. Toward the end of the narrative Pym and Peters are trapped by a landslide, and after they fruitlessly search through "a vast pit of black granite" (Q, II, 840) for an avenue of escape, they discover that they must descend a steep, almost perpendicular cliff. Peters first reaches the bottom; then Pym begins his descent. However, standing on the brink of the precipice, he, as the narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse," hesitates. A force compells him to leap into the abyss. He says,

Presently I found my imagination growing terribly excited by thoughts of the vast depths yet to be descended. . . . It was in vain I endeavoured to banish these reflections, . . . The more earnestly I struggled not to think, the more intensely vivid became my conception, 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 head-long descent. . . . I threw my vision far down into the abyss. . . . my whole soul was pervaded with a longing to fall; a desire, a yearning, a passion utterly uncontrollable. . . . 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 (Q, II, 845, Poe's italics).

Pym, as other heroes, hesitates on the brink of the precipice; he futilely attempts to reason away the impulse for self-destruction.<sup>7</sup> But once again reason falls impotent to passion, and Pym leaps. But before he falls, Pym hears Peter's voice as a "shrill-sounding and phantom voice" and sees Peters as "a dusky, fiendish, and filmy figure." In contrast to Pym's impression, Peters saves Pym. He does not act as the imp in the abyss, urging Pym to leap to his self-destruction; instead, he is what the narrator of "The Imp" calls the "friendly arm to check us" (Q, II, 640). The duplicity of Peters as both fiend and savior further illustrates the Perverseness that Pym so ardorously pursues throughout the story. For instance, besides the most general of similarities between Pym's account of the image of the abyss and earlier instances of Perverseness, some in particular can be illustrated: the "shrill-sounding voice" echoes back to the "loud and long scream or yell" that Pym hears before he loses consciousness when The Penguin runs down him and Augustus (Q, II, 728);

<sup>7</sup>Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, Meridian Books (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1960), pp. 376-77, interprets Pym's fall into the arms of Peters as a homosexual experience.

also, the "swoon" and subsequent fall into the abyss point back to Pym's "swoon" when he encounters cannibalism (Q, II, 742); and finally, the idea of self-destruction itself (the leap into the abyss) is behind Pym's desire to go to sea.

Although the two parts of the novel are supposedly written by two different people, a "Mr. Poe" and Pym, and although the styles of the two parts differ, and although the treatment of Perverseness is more abstract in the second part, the novel is nonetheless unified by its symbolic structure. When Pym is considered as a literal character, his voyage is to seek adventure, but if Pym is considered, as Covici suggests, as "a mode of consciousness," then his journey may well be interpreted symbolically as Pym's "exploration of the self." Pym's descent to the South Pole becomes a descent to the depths of the mind through the conscious and preconscious<sup>8</sup> states to the archetypic-collective unconscious mind. Paralleling this regression is another from civilization to barbarianism to the brink of the original unity of all things.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>The use of the word "preconscious" (or "foreconscious" or "selective inattention") is accepted in psychology (see Monroe, pp. 82-83) as meaning "the host of immediate perceptions and memories available to us if our attention requires them." "Such knowledge, present and past," Monroe says, "lies at the periphery of consciousness and requires only the green light of attention to come into full awareness." However, Pym, who has the knowledge of the axe as well as other vital pieces of information, does not allow (through repression) the green light to signal it, simply because he wishes to seek out his Perverse desires.

<sup>9</sup>The meaning of "the brink of the original unity of all things" is best explained in an analysis of Eureka, and thus will be explained fully in Chapter Five. Also this regression, from civilization to the



In the first part of the narrative when Pym figuratively sets out to discover his self, he stays within the confines of the conscious mind, and he never fully understands that Perverseness motivates his actions. At times, however, while Pym's guard--his consciousness--is down, the Perversity of his self is revealed to the reader in quick flashes or epiphanies, and the reader recognizes that Pym is guilty of self-deception. In these instances, although Pym is never aware of it, the reader realizes that Pym, by "selective inattention," has repressed in the preconscious mind some piece of vital information that allows him to experience Perverseness.

In the latter part of the narrative, Pym, thinking that he must continue the search for his self, sails on to the South Pole. And in doing so he reveals the third level of the mind, the unconscious. When Poe has Pym pass into the lower depths of the abyssmal-unconscious mind, he is exploring Perverseness as an archetype, a force which is in the collective unconsciousness, the fused selves, of all men.<sup>10</sup> Therefore,

brink, occupies a space of nine months; Pym leaves home in June and encounters the end in March. Certainly, the time scheme suggests a returning to the womb; however, on another level, Pym is returning to the origin of mankind, to the origin of the universe, which also has ramifications that can only be explained through an analysis of Eureka.

<sup>10</sup>Read, p. 119, in his discussion of the artist of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, says, "the deeper we descend, the less personal the unconscious becomes, until we reach the level of Jung's collective unconscious, where the contents, when we can realize or project them, seem to be universal in structure and archetypal in significance. In his desire, therefore, to realize the self, the artist can go too deep, and it may be that the unconscious elements most characteristic of the self lie just below the level of consciousness, in that penumbra which Freud calls the preconscious."

Pym's account of the voyage becomes objective and abstract, and epiphanies no longer exist for the reader. Most important, the mechanics of Perverseness are revealed in the interplay between the simple black and white images.

Slowly, these images take a distinct balance between black and white. The natives, of the island of Tsalal near the South Pole, have a "complexion [which is] a jet black," their clothing is made of the "skins of an unknown black animal," their weapons are "dark" (Q, II, 820), much of the terrain of the island is black (in a footnote Poe writes, "we noticed no light-coloured substances of any kind upon the island," Q, II, 846), the water on the island is "every possible shade of purple" (Q, II, 823), there are animals with "black wool" and a "black albatross" (Q, II, 825), and in contrast to the white egg shells that the natives see aboard the Jane Guy, their "birds' eggs" are "with dark shells" (Q, II, 828), and finally the natives have black teeth (Q, II, 851). The black motif is quite extensive and this catalogue only touches upon it.

As the narrative progresses, the contrast between black and white becomes subtly expressed as a tension, an antithesis which at first is unresolved, but finally ends in numerous catastrophic resolutions. At first, when the natives--as pointed out, primarily associated with black--first encounter Pym and his fellow voyagers, they are in varying degrees horrified by the color white. Pym says, "They had never before seen any of the white race" (Q, II, 821). As the natives

first approach the Jane Guy, they "moved with great rapidity"; however, when "Captain Guy," Pym says, "held up a white handkerchief on the blade of an oar, . . . the [natives] made a full stop" and expressed a great alarm. They responded with "a loud jabbering, . . . intermingled with occasional shouts" and continued so, for a full thirty minutes (Q, II, 820). Once the natives calm themselves, they board the ship, but again they avoid all objects white; Pym says, "We could not get them to approach several very harmless objects--such as the schooner's sails, an egg, an open book, or a pan of flour" (Q, II, 822).

Much later in the narrative, after the natives set the Jane Guy afire and it explodes, they become horrified at the sight of the corpse of a white polar bear that had been thrown on the beach during the explosion; they associate the catastrophe--"a thousand [of their men] perished by the explosion," Pym says, "while at least an equal number were desperately mangled"--with the whiteness of the bear. They begin to rush "wildly about." Finally, they drive a circle of wooden stakes around the dreaded whiteness and run into "the interior of the island" (Q, II, 839-40). Pym and Peters later escape and take a hostage, Nu-Nu. Nu-Nu's fears echo back to those which his fellowmen expressed. "The sight of the linen" sail frightens him (Q, II, 849), "he became violently affected with convulsions" when Pym takes "from [his] coat-pocket a white handkerchief" (Q, II, 850), and as the "fine white powder" falls "over the canoe," "Nu-Nu," Pym says, "threw himself

on his face in the bottom of the boat, and no persuasions could induce him to arise" (Q, II, 851).

As the three continue their journey to the South Pole, Pym says, "Many unusual phenomena now indicated that we were entering upon a region of novelty and wonder." All becomes white: the atmosphere near the Pole is composed of "a high range of light gray vapour"; the ocean is "no longer transparent, but of a milky consistency and hue" (Q, II, 850); and "a fine white powder, resembling ashes--but certainly not such--fell over the canoe and over a large surface of the water" (Q, II, 851). Eventually, they become engulfed in whiteness: Pym says,

The whole ashy material fell now continually around us, and in vast quantities. The range of vapour to the southward had arisen prodigiously in the horizon, and began to assume more distinctness of form. I can liken it to nothing but a limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far-distant rampart in the heaven. The gigantic curtain ranged along the whole extent of the southern horizon (Q, II, 851).

The stark contrast between first black images and then white ones changes to a chiaroscuro; however, at this point the light and dark areas do not define a figure but rather a force, a pronounced tension of black over white; Pym says, "A sullen darkness now hovered above us--but from out the milky depths of the ocean a luminous glare arose" (Q, II, 851-52).

Pym's eyes are ever constantly attempting to penetrate the "limitless cataract" of "ashy material" (Q, II, 851). He says, "The summit of the cataract was utterly lost in the dimness and the

distance. . . . at intervals there were visible in it wide, yawning, but momentary rents, and from out these rents, within which was a chaos of flitting and indistinct images, there came rushing and mighty, but soundless winds, tearing up the enkindled ocean in their course." At the very depths of the vortex, Pym momentarily sees the flashing of light--"a chaos of flitting and indistinct images" (Q, II, 852)--as the tension between the black and white flashes apparently attempts to resolve and allow the light and dark to focus into a figure.

The next day Pym and his companions "rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us." However, instead of passing over into the void, "there arose in our pathway," Pym says, "a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow" (Q, II, 852).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>These last images that Poe uses in *Pym* are remarkably paralleled later by Victor Hugo. In his "Contemplation suprême," Hugo says, "It is an extraordinary thing . . . but it is within oneself that one must look for what is without. The dark mirror is deep down in man. There is the terrible chiaroscuro. A thing reflected in the mind is more vertiginous than when seen directly. It is more than an image--it is a simulacrum, and in the simulacrum there is a specter. . . . When we lean over this well, we see there, at an abyssmal depth in a narrow circle, the great world itself" (Cited by Read, p. 118, italics added). At first the two passages may appear to be extraordinary analogues, but they are more than this. Poe discovers in 1837 what Hugo is later to contemplate. Theirs is the same vision: the "terrible chiaroscuro," the juxtaposition of dark and light shadows; the "vertiginous" effect, the dizziness of staring into the abyss; the "simulacrum," which for Hugo is a shadowy semblance that becomes a "specter," and for Poe, an Imp or "a shrouded human figure . . . of the perfect whiteness of the snow." Basically, what Hugo understands by the statement--"it is within oneself that one must look for what is without"--is that reality is within the mind, not without; he as an artist looks toward the subjective world of reality, the glimpse into the abyss. Both have taken the first step toward the discovery of the self.

Pym has nothing else to say; the action of the novel abruptly ends; appended is a long and involved footnote which attempts to decipher the "indentures" (Q, II, 853, Poe's italics) that Pym and Peters came upon while buried in the landslide.

Up to the exploration of Tsalal, the island inhabited by the black natives, Poe, through Pym, examines Perverseness as individual behavior and at times parallels Pym's Perversity with a Perversity in nature. Now on another level, he explores Perverseness as collective and endemic to all men. The tension and forces embodied in the struggle between black and white are basically antithetical. Considered as such, they, for Poe, parallel the individual's struggle within himself as manifested in reason and passion, that is, the struggle that the Poe hero faces when gazing into the abyss.

On the archetypal-mythological level, the most obvious symbols in the story are the journey itself and the ocean. Another and perhaps the most fully developed is the antithetical struggle between the black and white metaphorical figures. These two contrasting but complimentary figures are best illustrated with the Yin-Yang principle.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>For a discussion of Yin-Yang, see Fung Yu-Lan, A History of Chinese Philosophy, translated by Derk Bodde (2 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), II, p. 7. In attempting to find "The Mythological Clue" to the rise and fall of civilizations, Arnold J. Toynbee in A Study of History, abridgement by D. C. Somervell (2 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), I, 60-67, utilizes the "primordial image" (61) of Yin-Yang; that is, "an encounter between two superhuman personalities." He briefly describes the struggle that takes place in such stories as "the Fall in the Book of Genesis," "the encounter between the Lord and Satan [in] the Book of Job," and the

The natives are Yin, and Pym and his companions are Yang. The relationship between the two groups is further examined in the manner in which Yin-Yang expresses itself: Yin is passive and Yang is active; they are respectively negative and positive, earth and heaven, evil and good, black and white, lower and upper, stasis and flux, as well as other contrasting figures. As Poe presents them, the white men as "Yang" voyage from the upper regions of the world to actively explore the South Pole; they are good and positive and in flux, wishing no harm to the natives. In Poe's narrative, however, the black men as "Yin" inhabit the lower regions of the world and passively remain in their geographical region. As stated in the narrative, they have few canoes, thus lacking the transportation to actively seek out others of their own kind. When contrasted with the whites, they are primitive, static, and negative. They are evil; Pym says they "were among the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe" (Q, II, 830).

"encounter between the Lord and Mephistopheles [in] Goethe's Faust" (60) as a challenge and response which all men and civilizations must face in order to evolve. Toynbee says that each "story opens with a perfect state of Yin"; then an "impulse or motive . . . comes from outside" and causes Yin to pass over into a state of Yang (62-63). Also Yin and Yang are associated with the primordial images of light and darkness. Ernst Cassirer in Language and Myth, translated by Susanne K. Langer (New York: Dover Publication, Inc., 1953), pp. 13-14, says, the "mythic conception originally grasp[ed] only the great, fundamental, qualitative contrast of light and darkness" (14). From these contrasting images, the diurnal struggle between the day and the night, mythopoetic man evolved his individual gods or God. And this very struggle served as the basis for his heroes' struggle with the forces of evil.

When Pym, Peters, and Nu-Nu escape from Tsalal, they leave a predominately black landscape and are sailing toward whiteness. But after a number of days the contrast of black and white reappears; the whites and the blacks become abstractly represented in a mixture of the two: Pym says, "a sullen darkness now hovered above us--but from the milky depths of the ocean a luminous glare arose"; Pym views, in the far reaches of the vortex, "flitting and indistinct images"; eventually, he sees that "there came rushing and mighty, but soundless winds, tearing up the enkindled ocean in their course" (italics added). Pym views within the abyssmal depth the cosmic tornado, the whirling mass of Yin-Yang; metaphorically, he sees enclosed in a circle two giant commas, one black, the other white, whirling around in a vortex.

The inclusion of the white shrouded figure is certainly mysterious and has little to do with Yin and Yang. However, in ancient folklore the abyss is considered the home of the gods or a god. Gertrude Jobes<sup>13</sup> lists several of such gods: for instance, "Ageb in Egyptian mythology" is the "deity of the abyss or watery depth"; and "Mahasahasrapramardani," a "goddess," sometimes called "Great Lady of the void," is colored "white." Although these gods of the deep were certainly in all probability unknown to Poe, nevertheless, the number of them in a variety of

<sup>13</sup>See "Abyss" in Gertrude Jobes, Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols, Vol. I of 3 vols. (New York: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1962). Kaplin, pp. 155-56, and Levin, p. 121, interpret the black and white images, especially since Poe was a Southerner, as Poe's "racial phobia."



cultures suggests that the metaphor of a white god or goddess at the midpoint of a void or abyss is archetypal and thus readily available to Poe. As stated earlier the white shrouded figure has no immediate relationship with Yin-Yang; but later when Poe concludes his search in Eureka, the two blend together in his cosmological explanation of Perverseness.

Thus, Poe, in the first part of the Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, is examining Perversity on an individual level through the conscious and preconscious minds. Pym as Imp, "a mode of consciousness," searches for his self and cannot find it, but can "betray" it to his reader. In the second half, Poe explores the unconscious mind and discovers that the collective self of mankind is also Perverse. In his view, man individually and collectively is subject to the same principle of Perverseness whether it be called an antithetical tension between reason and passion or the thesis-antithesis of Yin and Yang.

In Poe's earlier, prize-winning tale, "Ms. Found in a Bottle" (1833) and in two later tales, "Descent into the Maelstrom" (1841) and "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), Poe concentrates on examining his heroes' immediate responses to a confrontation with the abyss. In the first two tales the abyss takes the form of a geographical-marine vortex, a hole in the South Pole and a maelstrom;<sup>14</sup> in the

<sup>14</sup>Poe's sea tales--"Ms. Found in a Bottle," Pym, and "Descent into the Maelstrom"--are typical of the theme of the storm-tossed boat in the paintings of Turner, Cole, Ryder, Gericault, and Friedrich. For a discussion of the theme in art, see Lorenz Eitner, "The Open

latter tale<sup>15</sup> it is presented as a dark pit into which the narrator has been placed by the Spanish Inquisition.

"Ms.," the first tale Poe wrote of a hero's voyage into the abyss, is the only one of the three in which the hero is destroyed. In the other two tales, as in Pym, the heroes are saved from annihilation by what appears at first to be only a mysterious quirk of chance. However, a closer examination of the three tales and of the novel indicates that those heroes who survive do not do so solely as the result of chance, but instead that their salvation is at least partially

Window and the Storm-Tossed Boat: An Essay in the Iconography of Romanticism," Art Bulletin, XXXVII (December, 1955), 281-90. Eitner, p. 289, especially refers to a drawing by Victor Hugo. He says, "Hugo's drawing has a special interest for us, because in it the artist openly declares a symbolical intention: the sheet is quite legibly inscribed 'Ma Destinee.' It shows a huge wave about to engulf a foundering wreck. The chaotic turbulence of this vision and the way in which water, foam, sky, and ship are drawn into a great rotating vortex strikingly recall the late sea-storms of William Turner, such as the Fire at Sea and the Ship in a Snowstorm." But the theme is not limited to painting; in literature, for instance, Rimbaud's Le Bateau ivre and Mallarmé's Un Coup de Dés have more similarities with Poe's tales--Poe wrote his before his French counterparts--than can be pointed out here. Much work remains to be done in this area. Translated copies of Un Coup de Dés may be found in Bernard Weinberg, The Limits of Symbolism (Chicago: The University Press, 1966), extended between pp. 246-47; also Dice Thrown Never Will Annul Chance, trans. Brian Coffey, Dublin: The Dolman Press, 1965. The most complete work on Mallarmé's poem, although demonstrating no relationship between Poe and Mallarmé, is Robert G. Cohn, Mallarmé's Un Coup de Dés: An Exegesis. A Yale French Studies Pub., 1949; also Conn's Mallarmé's Masterwork: New Findings. The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1966.

<sup>15</sup>Although "The Pit and the Pendulum" is not one of Poe's sea tales, it is included in this analysis because its narrator confronts a similar abyss in the same manner as do the narrators and heroes of the sea tales.

the result of their own curiosity about the force which threatens to destroy them.

The importance of curiosity is first demonstrated in "Ms." The narrator, though he is caught in a malignant whirlpool and faces inevitable and immediate death, declares that his "soul" is "wrapt in silent wonder" (Q, I, 131). This wonder develops rapidly into curiosity which motivates him to seek knowledge about the nature of the abyss which threatens him. He soon perceives that the abyss holds "some exciting knowledge--some never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction" (Q, I, 135-36). His "curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions," he says, "predominates even over my despair, and will reconcile me to the most hideous aspect of death" (Q, I, 135). Because he considers the discoveries he makes about the abyss even more important than his death, he records them in a journal, which he places within a bottle and casts into the sea for posterity. But the nature of the discovery is vague, perhaps because Poe himself did not at the time he wrote the story understand fully the implications of the abyss. The narrator can only say,

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 by-gone 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. I shall never--I know that I shall never--be satisfied with regard to the nature of my conceptions. Yet it is not wonderful that these conceptions are indefinite, since they have their origin in sources so utterly novel. A new sense--a new entity is added to my soul (Q, I, 133).

Although in this first tale the narrator's curiosity does not save him, Poe continues to work with the idea. In Pym, which Poe writes shortly after "Ms.," Pym's curiosity aids him in avoiding annihilation. For instance, Pym is saved from the landslide, which killed Captain Guy and his crew, because he is curious. He says, while walking through the gorge, "there were one or two stunted shrubs growing from the crevices, bearing a species of filbert which I felt some curiosity to examine." While he is thus occupied, he is "aware of a concussion resembling nothing," he says, "I had ever before experienced" (Q, II, 832). A landslide, which the natives had perpetrated, buries all of the men; however, Pym and Peters are saved.

Later in "The Descent," the hero experiences the same curiosity in his predicament as those before him. The old man, who is caught in the horror of the maelstrom with his two brothers, says, "after a little while I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself" (Q, I, 349). And again, he says, "I have already described the unnatural curiosity which had taken the place of my original terrors" (Q, I, 351). Also in "The Pit," the narrator, awaking after he swoons, finds himself in a "blackness of eternal night" (Q, I, 436). He has, after numerous tortures, a similar interest in his surroundings. The narrator says, "I had little object-- certainly no hope--in these researches; but a vague curiosity prompted me to continue them" (Q, I, 437). Not long after, he says, "my soul took a wild interest in trifles" (Q, I, 439). As he lies strapped

to a flat surface, he watches the pendulum descend as each sweep of its blade comes closer to his chest. His observations are similar to those before; he says, "I pondered upon all this frivolity," and "I took a frenzied pleasure in contrasting its downward with its lateral velocity" (Q, I, 441).

Both in "The Descent into the Maelstrom" and "The Pit and the Pendulum," the Poe heroes, prior to their curiosity, undergo an anguish which develops from the realization of their predicament. Faced with the threat of the external forces of the maelstrom and the pit, these heroes immediately attempt to reason their way out of the problem confronting them, try a number of times to establish some "hope" for escape. As the narrators are introduced to or approach the external threat, their rational faculties become aware of the impending danger; but immediately following this realization, they are further threatened by what rational steps they are to take to free themselves from the situation. Thus, they at first realize the problems quite objectively (the maelstrom or pit) and then become involved subjectively (faced with the decision of how to respond to the threat).<sup>16</sup> In their efforts to reason away the fear of the

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre in Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 29-32, makes this same distinction between the objective (fear) and subjective (anguish) confrontation with death. He also uses the metaphor of the abyss. A man walks along a precipice and stares into the abyss; at first he feels fear which is based on the objective contingencies that could contribute to his falling, for instance, loose rocks or railing. Then, he feels anguish (subjective); knowing that he must walk along the precipice, he must calculate how he will act, will avoid falling into the abyss.

external force and the anguish of how to respond to the threat, their rational faculties fall impotent. For some unknown reason their fall comes about through deceptions and miscalculations on their part, and what might also be called a general abeyance of mental power. As a result, these two heroes view any further rational efforts as futile and the need for survival is displaced by despair. After the numbness lessens, after they have completely realized their doom, they then experience a bewildering curiosity; they ironically embrace the moments of their coming death. And, in doing so, they, unlike the other Poe heroes, are able to relax the efforts of their reason, thus eventually reaching a balance between reason and passion. This return to the normal state of mind comes about gradually, so much so that the Poe heroes are not able to perceive it. While waiting for what to them is their unavoidable and immediate destruction, they entertain themselves with the mechanics of the maelstrom or the pendulum; they begin to describe them and measure their movements; in other words, they tend back toward objectivity as they forget their own subjective predicament. For instance, the old man in "The Descent," in giving up all hope for his deliverance, begins to analyze objectively--not to solve his problem, but only to amuse himself--other objects caught in the whirl of the maelstrom; he says, "I . . . sought amusement in speculating upon the relative velocities of their [numerous things that floated in our company] several descents toward the foam below" (Q, I, 351, Poe's italics). However, each calculation proves false.

Likewise, the narrator of "The Pit" attempts numerous times to measure his surroundings again objectively. When he first finds himself in the dark, circular pit, he measures the circumference of the wall so that he can determine his environment, but he is ultimately deceived (Q, I, 439). Later, when the pendulum sweeps across his chest, he entertains the idea of its cutting into his flesh, but "at this thought," he says, "I paused. I dared not go any further than this reflection." Instead, he contrasts the pendulum's "downward with its lateral velocity"; he compares it metaphorically--not concentrating on its reality--to "the shriek of a damned spirit" and to "the stealthy pace of the tiger" (Q, I, 441).

While these Poe heroes avoid concentrating on themselves, but concentrate on objects, slowly, a half-formed thought flashes into their minds, but it eludes them. Again the idea, forcing itself back into their consciousness, partially illuminates them. At last, they begin to cry out with hope. The old man in "Descent," after his numerous calculations fail, says that these calculations "set me upon a train of reflection that made my limbs again tremble, and my heart beat heavily once more" (Q, I, 351). All the time, right before his eyes were his means of escape. However, because of his predicament, he had thought only of those objects going down into the maelstrom while all the time others were being flushed out. Once he is able to get his mind off himself or off the objects which, similar to him are being whirled down to their destruction, he notices

that cylindrical objects are rising and being freed from the maelstrom. He is saved by lashing himself "securely to a water-cask" (Q, I, 352). Motioning to his remaining brother to do the same, he sees that his brother is in a frenzy. Whereas he is able to overcome the destructive powers of reason turned within, his brother is not. In the same way, the narrator of "The Pit" escapes. After he "ponder[s]" (Q, I, 441) the pendulum objectively, he, as the old man in the maelstrom, enters upon a "collected calmness of despair." He says, "It now occurred to me, that the bandage, or surcingle, which enveloped me, was unique" (Q, I, 442, Poe's italics). All the time, the most obvious has not been in the range of his perception. He places food on the strap, the rats eat the strap away, and he is free--or at least has gained himself enough time, allowing General Lasalle to save him. Before them, the old man in "Descent" and the narrator in "The Pit" see that which was always in their perceptual field, always in view, but which was all the time repressed in their minds because of the impotence of their reason.

A natural progression exists from the struggles of these Poe heroes to the quite elementary reasoning of Poe's superhero, C. Auguste Dupin. The old man of "The Descent" and the narrator of "The Pit," when attempting to use their reason to free themselves from an external threat, strain the balance between reason and passion; reason, in search for a solution to the problem, tries to check the anguish, which grows out of passion. For Usher and Wilson and others the tension



is too great; as has been pointed out, their reason falls to their passion. However, the heroes who confront the maelstrom and the pit are able to relax the tension by becoming curious, by embracing the threat. Out of this curiosity, they discover that all efforts at reason force them to overlook the most obvious, the most superficial means of escape. In other words, their reason misguides them and leads them to look too deep into the well, into themselves for the answer; their escape does not require profundity; likewise, there is no reason to get impassioned. Whereas one whirls around the maelstrom countless times and does not observe those objects being flushed out, the other for days stares at the pendulum, knowing that it will eventually destroy him, and because of his excited nature does not make the most obvious deduction. With this knowledge, Poe has now simply to create his detective hero C. Auguste Dupin. The super-sleuth knows that truth is mostly on the surface. In "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" he points out that the French investigator "erred continually by the very intensity of his investigation." He says, "Thus there is such a thing as being too profound. Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial. The depth lies in the valleys where we seek her, and not upon the mountain-tops where she is found" (Q, I, 326). With another analogy, Dupin explains,

The modes and sources of this kind of error are well typified in the contemplation of the heavenly bodies. To look at a star by glances--to view it in a side-long way, by turning toward it the exterior portions of the retina (more susceptible

of feeble impressions of light than the interior), is to behold the star distinctly--is to have the best appreciation of its lustre--a lustre which grows dim just in proportion as we turn our vision fully /Poe's italics/ upon it. A greater number of rays actually fall upon the eye in the latter case, but in the former, there is the more refined capacity for comprehension. By undue profundity we perplex and enfeeble thought /italics added/; and it is possible to make even Venus herself vanish from the firmament by a scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct" (Q, I, 326).

Poe's heroes develop from those--such as the narrators of the compulsive-confession tales, the narrator of "Ligeia," and "Usher" and "Wilson"--who are unable to relax the tension between reason and passion and consequently fall to their self-destruction. The heroes of the sea tales encounter the abyss, but escape it. Pym never realizes the tension since he represses the necessary elements that would establish the antithesis between reason and passion. As mentioned, in Pym Poe is not interested in drawing a complete character, but rather in investigating Perverseness symbolically on the individual and the collective levels of the psyche. Poe found it necessary to sustain parts of Pym's rational faculties so that he could also sustain the narrative. The other heroes who voyage into the abyss experience temporarily the tension between reason and passion; however, once they give up the effort to reason and abandon all hope and finally embrace their own destruction, then they return to and maintain the necessary, but delicate balance. They discover that their salvation was all the time before them; they come to understand that they in their excitable natures have repressed the most obvious means of an escape from the threat of self-destruction. From these characters evolves Poe's sleuth

Dupin who is aware from the beginning that truth is usually on the surface, and that men fail because they look beyond truth as Pym looked beyond his "self," looked too deep into the well. Dupin, who outwits the French Prefect in "The Purloined Letter," discovers the letter in the most obvious place--on the top of a desk. At first, Dupin seemingly is Poe's God-like man, a man who can hold off the threat of a hostile world; however, as Poe develops the character, and especially other characters like him--William Legrand and Ellison--it becomes evident that he in inventing Dupin was sidetracked, that no man can hold back the threat of the cosmic vortex which he so clearly defines in Eureka.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE TALES OF RATIOCINATION AND

### THE LANDSCAPE PIECES

The Poe hero, as has been pointed out, constantly battles the Perverse compulsion to act against his self, or as the narrator of "The Black Cat" says, the "unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself--to offer violence to its own nature--to do wrong for the wrong's sake only" (Q, I, 478). Several of Poe's heroes are destroyed either physically or psychically when they encounter within their self this Perversity. In the compulsive-confession tales, the tales of the Double, and the voyage tales, Poe attempts through his heroes to evolve a solution to the threat of Perverseness. In "A Descent into the Maelstrom" and "The Pit and the Pendulum," it becomes evident that the tension between reason and passion when relaxed allows the heroes to regain their wits and ultimately to save themselves from self-destruction. Passing through stages of hope to despair and back to hope, the Poe heroes in these tales give up their identity or self-worth and embrace their death or become amused with the mechanics contributing to their death. Paradoxically, once they have given up all hope, they then again have a chance for hope. As the tension between reason and passion lessens, they begin for the first time to realize by imperceptible gradations their chance for survival. It becomes evident to these heroes that all the time their means of escape were right before their eyes; but because of a frenzied state

of mind--the result of a tension between reason and passion--they were unable to identify the most obvious facts. Out of such a discovery, the hero C. Auguste Dupin and his prototypes Legrand and Ellison evolve.

Dupin at first appears to be Poe's attempt at creating another Roderick Usher. In the general characterization of the two men, Poe carefully invites an association between the two aristocrats. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" Dupin, as Usher, inhabits "a time-eaten and grotesque mansion, . . . tottering to its fall in a retired and desolate portion" of the city (Q, I, 318). Both Dupin and Roderick, furthermore, depend on their friends, who are also fictionally represented as the narrators of the tales. Roderick writes to his friend for help (Q, I, 263) and Dupin allows him to pay for the rent and furnishings; the narrator of "The Murders" discloses, "as my worldly circumstances were somewhat less embarrassed than his own, I was permitted to be at the expense of renting, and furnishing in a style which suited the rather fantastic gloom of our common temper" (Q, I, 317-318). Moreover, each hero and his friend spend part of their time together in reverie; Dupin's narrator-friend--as Usher's (Q, I, 271)--says, "we . . . busied our souls in dreams--reading, writing or conversing" (Q, I, 318). Also, the general description of the two men is similar; Dupin, as Usher (Q, I, 272), has a "manner" which is "frigid and abstract"; "his eyes," the narrator says, "were vacant in expression; while his voice, usually a rich tenor, rose into

a treble" (Q, I, 318). Certainly, other deliberate associations exist; but, more important, the main difference between the two heroes is that a tarn (abyss) does not threaten Dupin. As the narrator clearly points out several times, Dupin's mental capacity is well above that of the normal human being, surely, a strong clue that Dupin will not fall prey to passion, the impulse for self-destruction.

With the deliberate association between Usher and Dupin in mind, Poe's reader might expect that, at last, the author has developed a hero who can survive a Perverse world. In fact, most commentators on the tales of ratiocination argue that Dupin is the Poe hero par excellence. For instance, Edward Davidson says, "We feel more comfortable with [Dupin] than we do with any other of Poe's heroes." Davidson goes so far as to say that Dupin is the "nineteenth-century fulfillment of what Benjamin Franklin so ably defined in The Way to Wealth and in his Autobiography" as the successful man.<sup>1</sup>

Although the tales of ratiocination are some of Poe's most successful, it is apparent that they do not deal with the central issues found in Poe's other tales. They seem to be an attempt by Poe to avoid the problem of the imp in the abyss and of Perverseness by placing his hero Dupin outside the fictional world his other heroes inhabit. For a successful hero, Poe creates a superhuman being, a man

<sup>1</sup>Edward H. Davidson, Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 215.

whom Robert Daniel calls a "secular god."<sup>2</sup> Harry Levin best makes the distinction between Poe's other characters, of which Usher is the prototype, and his detective-god, Dupin; Levin says that Poe's Dupin "is an imperturbable master of ceremonies, who says in effect, 'Please observe, I have nothing up my sleeve.' In most of his other tales, the speaker is a maniacal stranger who says, 'Don't look now, but we're being followed.'"<sup>3</sup>

Dupin, the hero of the tales of ratiocination, somehow fails to be fully convincing because he is too flawless to be accepted as a realistic character. He appears instead to be the result of Poe's own intense anxiety to feel that the world is rational, the result of his need to find within at least one character the necessary solidarity to withstand the ever-present abyss of the mind. Levin notes that Poe is guilty of this over indulgence in reason. He says, "No doubt they [the tales of ratiocination] protest too much that the situation is under control; the author makes so self-conscious an exhibit of rationality that we feel he has been challenged on that score."<sup>4</sup> Much like those poets and novelists who exploit and indulge in sentiments for their own sake, Poe to the opposite extreme in the

<sup>2</sup>Robert Daniel, "Poe's Detective God," Furioso, VI (Summer, 1951), 46.

<sup>3</sup>Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness, Vintage Books (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 142. For an opposing view see Davidson, pp. 213-222.

<sup>4</sup>Levin, p. 142.

tales of ratiocination overindulges in the exhibition of reason for its own sake. A reading of "The Murders" and "The Purloined Letter" discloses that at the moment of composition Poe, identifying himself with Dupin, was really more interested in the conundrums and cryptograms than in a further examination of Perverseness.

The main fault with the tales rests with the point of view. Poe, to make the tales successful and to heighten Dupin's omnipotence, characterizes his narrator and those official detectives representing society as stooges. When Dupin exercises his super-reasoning powers for the narrator or for the Prefect of the French police, the two men are dumbfounded. For instance, in "The Murders" while walking the streets at night, Dupin reads the narrator's mind. In response to this feat, the narrator says, "'Dupin . . . this is beyond my comprehension. I do not hesitate to say that I am amazed, and can scarcely credit my senses. How was it possible you should know I was thinking of--?'" The narrator questions Dupin about how he is able "to fathom his soul" (Q, I, 319). In another tale, "The Purloined Letter," when Dupin hands over the letter in question to the Prefect, both the narrator and the French detective are amazed. The narrator recalls, "I was astounded. The Prefect appeared absolutely thunder-stricken. For some minutes he remained speechless and motionless, looking incredulously at my friend with open mouth, and eyes that seemed starting from their sockets" (Q, II, 599).

Having these two men stand in awe of Dupin's seemingly omnipotent powers is Poe's attempt to invite his reader to respond in a



similar manner. In fact, throughout the tales of ratiocination and especially in the first of these, Poe coaxes his reader to identify with the narrator and the police--that society apart from Dupin.

Daniel, discussing Poe's attempt to establish Dupin as "the Analyst par excellence," points out that in the opening essay accompanying the first tale, "The Murders," Poe with several "preliminary paradoxes" places his "reader in a frame of mind where he will believe anything."

Poe, at first, Daniel says, gives a "specious demonstration that checkers is a more profound game than chess." But before the reader can scoff or protest at such inanity, Poe hurries his reader on, Daniels says, "into a discussion of the frivolity of chess as compared with whist."<sup>5</sup> By stretching the truth in the opening pages, Poe prepares his reader for what will follow; he also attempts to strengthen the believability of the tale by moving from an abstract discussion to a concrete plot which the narrator advances as a testimonial. It becomes quite evident that if Poe plans for the reader to identify with the narrator and the Prefect, he himself begins to identify--definitely too much so--with Dupin. As a result, the reader, ironically for Poe, becomes consciously aware that the author is deliberately lowering the narrator's ability to perceive (that is, making him into a stooge) so as to make Dupin appear that much more omnipotent. Also, the reader sees that Poe--as author--has preplanned the plot and manipulated the string of facts that invariably lead to Dupin's deductions. In other

<sup>5</sup>Daniel, p. 49.

words, Poe's intrusion is too self-evident and his self-identification with Dupin mars the tales.

The tales of ratiocination have been successful with the reading public and have served as models for later detective stories; but as efforts to evolve a hero who can maintain the delicate balance between reason and passion, the tales prove to be failures. Some<sup>6</sup> have argued that Dupin is a successful hero because he does not fall prey to fancy but uses his imagination, the higher form of reverie. However, when Dupin solves the crime of the Rue Morgue and locates the purloined letter, he not so much uses his imagination as he does his reason and his ability to observe facts which others do not see. But what appears as Dupin's omniscience is in reality the result of a careful plotting of the tale by the author to allow Dupin alone to be the vehicle through which the truth is revealed to the mystified reader. In "The Murders" no reason exists for the inability of the police to identify the hair and the ribbon found at the scene of the crime other than Poe's simply not allowing them to do so. By making them stooges he makes Dupin look better than he really is. At the end of the tale, Poe directs his reader once again to look condescendingly at the Prefect as Dupin does, thus leaving the reader with the last impression that the detective was not able to solve

<sup>6</sup>Marvin and Frances Mengeling, "From Fancy to Failure: A Study of the Narrators in the Tales of Edgar Allan Poe," University Review, XXXIII (1967), 293-298, and XXXIV (1967), 31-37.

the crime because of his inferiority.<sup>7</sup>

Quite rhetorically, Poe argues his point throughout the tales of ratiocination, strategically disarming the man of society and raising Dupin to the role of a secular god. However, not satisfied with his efforts, he attempts in three other tales--"The Gold Bug," "The

<sup>7</sup>Although Poe writes of Dupin as if he were a deity among men and in his letters Letters, ed. John Ward Ostrom (2 vols.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1948), II, 328<sup>7</sup> favors the character, he also has ambivalent feelings about him. It is difficult to determine if Poe meant seriously to satirize his hero in the tale "Bon-Bon" (1832) or if the association between the devil and Dupin is only a coincidence. But even though Poe wrote "Bon-Bon" approximately nine years before the first detective tale, the relationship between the two tales is perhaps deliberate, for it was a common practice of Poe to preview in his satirical tales his later serious tales. The direct parallels between the two tales are based on Dupin's ability to "fathom" the narrator's "soul" (Q, I, 319). In "Bon-Bon" the devil is able to duplicate the feat; however, this time, in keeping with the jest, Poe has the devil read the mind of a cat. Bon-Bon prompts the devil to such action when he discovers that underneath the "green spectacles" the devil has no eyes; in fact, there were, Bon-Bon says, "no indications of their having existed at any previous period--for the space where eyes should naturally have been was, I am constrained to say, simply a dead level of flesh." The devil, demonstrating to Bon-Bon that his vision is beyond that of any mortal, proceeds to read the cat's mind. He says, "She is thinking we admire the length of her tail and the profundity of her mind. She has just concluded that I am the most distinguished of ecclesiastics, and that you are the most superficial of metaphysicians." Whereas the narrator of the tales of ratiocination is amazed at Dupin's ability to "fathom his soul," the devil in "Bon-Bon" says, "my vision is the soul" (Q, I, 121). Also the devil's wearing "green spectacles" is later paralleled when Dupin wears them in "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (Q, I, 400) and again in "The Purloined Letter" (Q, II, 605). Each time Dupin wears them, he not only maintains the darkness he is fond of but also uses them to deceive his adversary. The devil in reading the cat's mind displays the same arrogance particular to Dupin. He tells Bon-Bon that the cat thinks that he is "the most distinguished" and that Bon-Bon is "the most superficial" (Q, I, 121).

Landscape Garden," and "The Domain of Arnheim"--to model two new heroes after Dupin. Poe makes the most obvious of associations among the three heroes; for instance, to bolster an optimistic world view in these tales, he employs tag names. Whereas Dupin's full name is C. Auguste Dupin, the hero in "The Gold Bug" is William Legrand and in "The Landscape Garden" and "The Domain of Arnheim," the rich man leaving his millions to his closest kin, Mr. Ellison, the hero of the tale, is named Seabright Ellison. Also when grouped together these heroes have a common interest in money. Dupin and Legrand have lost their fortunes, but Legrand eventually regains his when he solves Captain Kidd's cryptogram and finds the buried treasure. Ellison is more fortunate than the first two heroes, for he inherits "four hundred and fifty millions of dollars" (Q, I, 390; II, 673, Poe's italics).

These attempts and others at optimism still fall short. Despite a set of positive traits, these heroes have in common the malignant stain associated with Perverseness. As Dupin who suffers from "a diseased intelligence" (Q, I, 318) and has little to do with the outside world, Legrand also withdraws from society. Legrand's friend, the narrator of the tale, discovers "much in the recluse to excite interest and esteem; he says, "I found him well educated, with unusual powers of mind, but infected with misanthropy, and subject to perverse moods of alternate enthusiasm and melancholy" (Q, I, 449). From the beginning of the narrative, an obsession drives Legrand to regain his lost fortune. As the pun in the title of the tale suggests, Legrand

is the gold bug. He is bitten by his own desire and is driven into a crazed state to regain his lost fortune. Legrand in this state is far from Poe's earlier hero Dupin who does at least from time to time help society even though his actions are prompted by the mere pleasure of defeating the Prefect "in his own castle" (Q, I, 340). Furthermore, in this tale, as in the Dupin tales, Poe continues to overindulge reason and to exploit it for its own sake. At midpoint in the tale, after Legrand has dug up the treasure, Poe then drags his reader through a tedious, twelve-page explanation of a step by step and line by line analysis of Captain Kidd's cryptogram (Q, I, 465-76). Evidently, this last mental exercise is to suggest to the reader that Legrand is rational, no longer "subject to perverse moods." However, this extended explanation, more so than in any of the Dupin tales, mars the work because balance in the tale is lost.

Once again Poe's search for the perfect hero proves a failure, but he continues in his efforts. In "The Landscape Garden" and "The Domain of Arnheim" Poe changes his strategy by avoiding altogether the theme of ratiocination and turning to the theme of the artist in society. But the change in theme does not alter Poe's hopes of establishing a hero who is stable. He has the narrator of "Arnheim" in the very first line of the tale direct his comments toward the hero's well-being. The narrator says, "From his cradle to his grave a gale of prosperity bore my friend Ellison along." And in an allusion to the Augustinian doctrine of Original Sin, the narrator

says, "in the brief existence of Ellison I fancy that I have seen refuted the dogma, that in man's very nature lies some hidden principle, the antagonist of bliss" (Q, II, 672). The narrator's accolades are interspersed throughout the tale and after the opening pages they become clumsy.

Ellison as an artist extolls the virtues of landscape gardening and praises the human imagination for its power to correct what in nature is a flaw. In practicing his aesthetic views, Ellison uses his inheritance of millions of dollars to landscape a portion of the earth, to create "a great, good place." Actually, what Poe is attempting to do through his hero is to reconstruct the prelapsarian world. By having Ellison remove the treacherous abysses from the landscape, he hopes to remove the threat of Perverseness and to recreate what poets of all ages have aspired to--an earthly paradise.

Although Ellison does not suffer from a diseased mind as do Dupin and Legrand, the task he sets for himself and the results the narrator speaks of are more fantasy than reality. In fact, the way to Arnheim is described as a dream. On a small boat, "the voyager" approaches the garden down a narrow "stream" that takes "a thousand turns." But as Levin points out, "we do not arrive until the final paragraph; and we scarcely begin to visualize Ellison's pleasure-dome. . . . If this is earthly felicity, the prospect is quickly withdrawn."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Levin, p. 126.

The two tales, "The Landscape Garden" and "The Domain of Arnheim," abound in a number of poetic passages. These landscape tales stand as Poe's contribution to the literature of the American Adam, what Charles Sanford calls the contribution "to the cultural drive for a paradisiac fulfillment in the New World."<sup>9</sup> However, Poe's attempt to establish the prelapsarian world fails. Sanford notes that in other of Poe's tales "the image of a mysterious blight mov[es] across the landscape and rot[s] the seed of all lovely, young life."<sup>10</sup> And as in the tales of ratiocination, the narrator of the late landscape pieces is too enthusiastic in his praise of Ellison, making the landscape artist unacceptable to the reader. In allowing the narrator to flatter Ellison excessively Poe is really intruding his own point of view into the narrative. Perhaps as Harry Levin suggests, "Poe, in one of his megalomaniac reveries, fancie[s] himself playing God as a landscape gardener and rearranging the scenery of a large and luxuriant domain."<sup>11</sup> The landscape tales come late in Poe's career

<sup>9</sup>Charles L. Sanford, "Edgar Allan Poe," in The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 298. For the tradition of the American Adam, see R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam, Phoenix Books (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

<sup>10</sup>Sanford, p. 298.

<sup>11</sup>Harry Levin, "Paradises, Heavenly and Earthly," in The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 174. For a general background in the literature of the Earthly Paradise, see Henri Baudet, Paradise on Earth, translated by Elizabeth Wentholt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965); Charles L. Sanford, The Quest for Paradise (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961); A. Bartlett Giamatti, The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

and his attempts to establish for his characters a positive relationship with the world, a union with a benevolent nature, fall short when compared with the earlier and more numerous tales of the demonic and Perverse, in which the heroes endure nightmares and long sufferings and sometimes compel themselves to confront their own self-destruction.

Although at first the tales of ratiocination and the late landscape pieces appear to be Poe's affirmation against Perverseness, they, when compared to the earlier tales, lack vitality, consistency in tone, and complete sincerity. In his enthusiasm to create a successful hero, Poe intrudes in the tales too much to allow his heroes the chance of developing as characters. In the tales of ratiocination, his overindulgence in reason and his constant prodding the reader to accept the heroes work against his efforts. And in the late landscape pieces, he appears to desire escape from the rigors of his earlier visions of Perverseness. Shortly after these attempts at a stable hero, Poe in his last work, the prose poem Eureka, arrives at an explanation for his heroes' malaise. In retrospect, he must have known that all efforts put forth by these last heroes were futile because he discovers that it is in the nature of things to be Perverse, for man to leap into the abyss in order to fulfill the longing for the original Unity of all things.



## CHAPTER V

### THE COSMOLOGY OF PERVERSENESS IN EUREKA

The prose poem Eureka can be seen as Poe's synthesis of the experiences of those heroes who were destroyed physically or psychologically in their confrontations with the imp of the Perverse and as the explanation of the Perverse force motivating his heroes. Poe takes the basic antithetical tension between reason and passion found in Perverseness and explains it from a cosmological level; in other words, he sees as the prime mover of individual men a force that lies behind the whole of the universe. In this analogous relationship between man and cosmos, Poe believed that he, as the title Eureka suggests, had at last found meaning in existence and in death. Although Eureka offers by no means a systematic philosophy, it is nonetheless a statement of the basic concepts which had shaped and vitalized Poe's important works.

Eureka is perhaps Poe's most esoteric work. The principles that Poe sets forth are simple in themselves, but the elaborate arguments, redundancies, and digressions, make the reading arduous and the meaning obscure. These arguments, though common to all discursive thought, appear out of place in Eureka since Poe relies on intuition instead of logical discourse for support of the essential parts of his thesis and thus contends that what he says is true because it is true. For instance, in the "Preface" to Eureka, he writes, "to those who feel rather than to those who think--to the dreamers and those who put

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faith in dreams as in the only realities--I offer this book of Truths, not in its character of Truth-Teller, but for the Beauty that abounds in its Truth, constituting it true" (S, IX, 4).<sup>1</sup> Also in the opening pages, he satirizes the reverence for Aristotle ("a Turkish philosopher called Aris and surnamed Tottle") and Bacon ("one Hog, surnamed 'the Ettrick shepherd'"). Whereas Poe finds fault in Aristotelian deduction and Baconian induction because they confine "investigation to crawling," he favors what he calls the "true Science, which makes its most important advances, as all History will show, by seemingly intuitive leaps" (S, IX, 11, Poe's italics). He turns to Kepler, who, he believes, made such intuitive leaps and who glimpsed the mysteries of the universe. Poe says, "Yes!--these vital laws Kepler guessed--that is to say, he imagined them" (S, IX, 20, Poe's italics).

Although Eureka may appear esoteric, if the elaborate arguments are removed (no danger exists in doing so, for as pointed out, Poe's thesis is not contingent upon proof), the principles remain in their simplicity. Edward Davidson says that Poe, not unlike others before him, considers

three scientific problems relating to the physical universe:  
first, the concept of creation (or, how did matter become

<sup>1</sup>Quotations from Poe's Eureka are taken from The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. Edmund Clarence Stedman and George Edward Woodberry, 10 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), hereafter cited in the text of this paper as S, followed by volume number and page number.

what it appears to be?); second, the nature of matter (or what is matter and how is the observed physical universe energized?); and third, the prospect for the natural world or, toward what ends is the ever changing universe moving).<sup>2</sup>

Around these problems which continue to perplex thinkers, Poe constructs his major proposition: "In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation" (S, IX, 6, Poe's italics). To amplify the proposition Poe sets forth a number of principles. The basic argument is that God willed into existence--"from His Spirit, or from Nihilility"--"Matter in its utmost conceivable state of . . . Simplicity" (S, IX, 32, Poe's italics). This willing into existence was a single act of creation, and since God willed from Himself, all of creation is God. Poe then turns to the "purpose" of the "primordial Particle" (the "Oneness" of creation being a single particle of matter). From this single particle the universe came about "by forcing the originally and therefore normally One into the abnormal condition of Many" (Poe's italics). In other words, God, the "primordial Particle," fragments Himself--Poe employs Platonic terminology--from the "One" to the "Many." As the Particle diffuses into space, it reaches out "to immeasurable but still definite distances in the previously vacant Space" (S, IX, 34). In Poe's system nothing is infinite, but rather beyond man's comprehension, "immeasurable." Thus, in this first part of

<sup>2</sup>Edward H. Davidson, Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 224.

creation, matter, originally a unity, becomes diffused equally across space, becomes in Poe's words, a "multiplicity out of unity--diversity out of sameness--heterogeneity out of homogeneity--complexity out of simplicity--in a word, the utmost possible multiplicity of relation out of the emphatically irrelative One" (S, IX, 35, Poe's italics).

After the "primordial Particle" diffuses spherically across space, there is a return to unity, that is, an action-diffusion and then a reaction-attraction. Unity (the "One") is a "normal" state, and fragmentation (the "Many") is an "abnormal" condition. Hence, Poe concludes, "A diffusion from Unity . . . involves a tendency ineradicable until satisfied," until all particles return to the original unity of all things (S, IX, 33). As the particles are attracted towards a common center, Poe says, "a repulsion of limited capacity" occurs. This force of repulsion must counteract the force of attraction so that individual particles cannot form into an "accumulation of various masses, each absolutely One" (S, IX, 37); in other words, repulsion among particles maintains total fragmentation until all of them return to the "primordial Particle." Poe calls the two forces thus discussed--variously labelled in the work as "gravitation" and "electricity"--"Attraction" and "Repulsion." He says, "The former is the body, the latter the soul; the one is the material, the other the spiritual, principle of the Universe. No other principles exist" (S, IX, 41, Poe's italics). The "Attraction" is the force compelling all particles towards a unity, and "Repulsion" is the force

repelling each particle from another. Poe posits that the two forces of attraction and repulsion cause matter; "Matter," he says, "exists only as Attraction and Repulsion[; ] Attraction and Repulsion are matter" (S, IX, 42, Poe's italics).

Poe maintains that all matter is rushing back to a state of unity, that mankind has "at length attained that great Now--the awful Present" (S, IX, 159, Poe's italics). The return to unity is so gradual, because of the immense size of the universe, that man is unable to perceive it. However, towards the end, when all of the stars and planets as well as other heavenly bodies draw closer together, the impending catastrophe will be perceptible. "Then," he writes, "amid unfathomable abysses, will be glaring unimaginable suns. But all this will be merely a climateric magnificence foreboding the great End." As the particles move closer toward reunification, they increase in velocity, their "spiritual passion for oneness" compelling them toward "a common embrace" (S, IX, 160). When all of the particles join again in one perfect particle, they will cease to exist either as the "Many" or as the "One." Poe says, "The absolutely consolidated globe of globes would be objectless. . . . Let us endeavor to understand that it would disappear, and that God would remain all in all" (S, IX, 162). In other words, matter will cease to exist because the forces of attraction and repulsion will no longer be in operation. "In sinking into Unity," Poe argues that matter "will sink at once into that Nothingness which, to all finite perception, Unity must be; into that

Material Nihilism from which alone we can conceive it to have been evoked, to have been created, by the Volition of God" (S, IX, 164). Thus, God, who is all matter, becomes Nothingness. Poe, however, says that God will not remain in this state, that He will once again will into existence another "primordial Particle." "The process we have here ventured to contemplate," Poe explains, "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" (S, IX, 164).

This world view, although nihilistic up to this point in Eureka, becomes for Poe optimistic.<sup>3</sup> For the first time in Eureka Poe directly considers the problem of evil or what he calls "Divine Injustice." He says, "In this view alone the existence of Evil becomes intelligible; but in this view it becomes more--it becomes endurable. Our souls no longer rebel at a Sorrow which we ourselves have imposed upon ourselves, in furtherance of our own purposes--with a view, if even with a futile view--to the extension of our own Joy" (S, IX, 167,

<sup>3</sup>Leslie A. Fiedler in No! in Thunder: Essays on Myth and Literature (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 18, discusses those artists who have a personal and theoretical vision of Nihilism. He says, "In the end, the negativist is no nihilist, for he affirms the void." Poe, throughout his prose and poetry, has this nihilistic view of the world, but in the closing pages he affirms the nature of things. However, John F. Lynen in "The Death of the Present," The Design of the Present (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 221, would disagree; he says, "Poe's optimism . . . is mainly theoretical and affords but slight consolation, for although the self may be destined to live forever and in a condition of perfect being, it will not survive as itself" (Lynen's italics).

Poe's italics). Although individual worlds and the men who inhabit them will be destroyed, out of the final catastrophe will come reunification with God. Man's "'sense of individual identity,'" Poe says, "'will be gradually merged in the general consciousness'" ; then man will begin to "'recognize his existence as that of Jehovah.'" And in the final sentence, as if consoling his reader, he writes, "'In the meantime bear in mind that all is Life--Life--Life within Life--the less within the greater, and all within the Spirit Divine.'" (S, IX, 169, Poe's italics).<sup>4</sup>

In essence the argument<sup>5</sup> Poe puts forth in Eureka is that God in a single creative act wills into existence a "primordial Particle," perfect in its oneness. The substance of the particle is God; in

<sup>4</sup>These closing lines to Eureka are definitely Oriental in philosophy. For a discussion of the analogues between Poe's Eureka and Eastern religion, see D. Ramakrishna, "Poe's Eureka and Hindu Philosophy," Emerson Society Quarterly, No. 47 (II Quarter 1967), 28-32. Some critics see parallels in Poe's thinking and Transcendentalism; see Arnold Smithline, "Eureka: Poe as Transcendentalist," ESQ, No. 39 (II Quarter 1965), 25-38, and P. F. Quinn, "Poe's Eureka and Emerson's Nature," ESQ, No. 31 (II Quarter 1963), 4-7; Ottavio M. Casale, "Poe on Transcendentalism," ESQ, No. 50 (I Quarter 1968), 85-97.

<sup>5</sup>For other recent summaries and discussions of Eureka, see Lynen, pp. 217-220; Davidson, pp. 223-253; John G. H. Meister, "Poe's Eureka: A Study of Its Ideas, Sources, and Its Relationship to His Work" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1948); Carol H. Maddison, "Poe's Eureka," Texas Studies in Language and Literature, II (1960), 350-367; Reino Vertanen, "The Irradiations Of Eureka: Valery's Reflections on Poe's Cosmology," Tennessee Studies in Literature, VII (1962), 17-25; Charles Everett Bierly, "Eureka and the Drama of the Self: A Study of the Relationship between Poe's Cosmology and his Fiction" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1958).

other words, God wills Himself from nothingness into matter. After God wills the particle into being, it diffuses spherically across an indeterminable but finite area of space. But once God withdraws the original force, the myriad particles begin to return, as if forced by gravity, to a common center. Along with the force of attraction moving the particles back toward unity, there is also a tension established between the individual particles. The tension is a result of two forces: first, a force which Poe calls "attraction" and which is similar to gravity, but less powerful, working to compell the individual particles to coalesce; and second, a force which Poe calls "repulsion" which repells the particles from one another so that the fragmentation remains until all the particles are finally and at once reunified. This tension manifests itself in the form of matter. In fact, Poe says that "attraction" and "repulsion" are matter. When the particles converge, they unify simultaneously, forming again a single particle, perfect in its oneness. With the return to unity, the forces of attraction and repulsion will cease to exist and thus so will matter. Unity means annihilation. God once again becomes Nothingness. However, God's will to exist as matter and to return to nothingness is a cycle repeated forever and forever.

Eureka is definitely Poe's most abstract and ambitious work. The prose poem, written and published a year before his death in 1849, is his final attempt at systematizing his view of the world. And as the title suggests, he believed he had formulated it. Eureka is a synthesis



of Poe's earlier fictional efforts at defining Perverseness and as such is an apocalyptic vision of Perverseness on a cosmological level. Whereas in the tales Poe examines the impulse of Perverseness on the human or microcosmic level, in Eureka he studies the concept in relation to the universe or macrocosm. The abyss--the image associated with Perverseness--becomes in Eureka the void of space, the cosmos itself. As all matter rushes back into the original Unity of all things, it takes on the appearance of a cosmic vortex. The particles themselves are whirled around by the forces of attraction and repulsion as they move toward unity, and within the void of space, planets, circled by their satellites, spin around a central core in the solar systems which in turn make up the whirling mass of the nebulae.<sup>6</sup>

If the abyss image becomes the void of space, Perverseness becomes the force that compells all matter back into the original unity of all things. The mechanics behind Perverseness on the cosmological level are the antithetical tension between attraction and repulsion, and on the human level, the tension between reason and passion. The fragmented particles are eventually destroyed as they

<sup>6</sup>From a scientific point of view, much of what Poe theorized is similar to many of the principles in modern physics and astronomy. Arthur Hobson Quinn in Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography (New York: Appelton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1963), pp. 555-557, has included, in his biography of Poe the letters he received from two noted scientists whom he requested to read Eureka. Poe's cosmology is strikingly similar to the idea of the expanding and contracting universe; see George Gamow, The Creation of the Universe (New York: The Viking Press, 1952), pp. 21-43.

fall towards a common center, and when finally reunified they cease to exist, becoming nothingness. Similarly, in the tales, Poe's characters fall towards or look upon an abyss--for instance, a tarn, a mirror, a whirlwind, or a watery vortex--and are destroyed. Thus, for both matter in the cosmos and man in the world, Unity is annihilation.

Man is born into the universe as an individual self. However, as John Lynen points out, "When all entities return to the oneness of God, there can then be no individual selves. Selfhood is separateness: it is created by the walls of distinction which bound off the human individual from the all."<sup>7</sup> As Poe theorizes in Eureka, the "Many" is abnormal and the "One" is normal. Man's destiny is an inevitable loss of self; he will coalesce with other selves to form God. But man, as Poe portrays him in his tales, resists the compulsion to return to unity. Even so, no matter how each character tries to maintain his selfhood (individuality/identity), he cannot fight off the impulse to vex himself, to leap into the abyss and cause his own self-destruction. As Poe says in Eureka, the "tendency towards unity" is "ineradicable until satisfied" (S, IX, 33). When compared to the attraction-repulsion principle of Poe's cosmology, the Poe hero, Lynen says, "exists through repulsion"; he maintains his self when he resists the impulse or attraction towards the abyss. In a similar manner, matter as single particles maintains its existence through the tension of attraction and repulsion, for matter is attraction and

<sup>7</sup>Lynen, p. 218.

repulsion. Thus, the Poe hero's existence as an individual self, as well as all of matter as individual particles, is contingent upon attraction and repulsion and is contingent upon the impulse for self-destruction and the paradoxical urge to save one's self. However, even though he finds life in the principle, he also finds death. For repulsion (life), as pointed out, is not a strong enough force to hold off the attraction to unity (death). For the Poe hero self-annihilation is inevitable because the nature of things is Perverse; Poe emphasizes in Eureka, "In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation" (S, IX, 6, Poe's italics).

Direct parallels, as has been pointed out, exist between Poe's cosmological principles of attraction and repulsion and the human principles of passion and reason. In Eureka Poe says that attraction and repulsion are the "body" and the "soul," the "material" and the "spiritual" principles of the universe. "No other principles exist" (S, IX, 41, Poe's italics). Although much of what Poe postulates in Eureka still evidently lay unformulated in his mind when he wrote the tales, surprisingly, he was working with the identical principles, but on the human level. In the tale "The Imp of the Perverse" Poe employs the extended metaphor of the abyss to define his concept of Perverseness. The narrator standing on a precipice and staring into the abyss becomes on the human level what Poe formulates on the cosmic level in Eureka. An impulse of passion--the imp of the Perverse--

compells the narrator to leap into the abyss, but reason cautions him to stand back. The struggle as Poe defines it in the tale is between attraction and repulsion, the "body" and the "soul," the "material" and the "spiritual," the passion and the reason. As is inevitable, the narrator's reason falls impotent to passion, to the impulse of the Perverse, just as repulsion must finally fall impotent to attraction.

In those tales written before the compulsive-confession tales, the heroes are allegorical figures of reason and passion; they act out a dramatic dialogue of the "body" and the "soul." For instance, in "William Wilson" the dialogue or antithetical tension between reason and passion is manifested in the motif of the Double, in the allegorical figures of the two Wilsons. The first Wilson, as has been shown, is passion or the impulse for self-destruction, whereas the second Wilson is reason or the conscience demanding that the complete integrated personality of Wilson control the passion. The struggle between the two Wilsons--the tension as personified in reason and passion--is maintained until reason falls to passion as repulsion to attraction. Consequently, the conflict ends with the annihilation of the individual self; in the end when the second Wilson turns to the first, he says, "thou hast murdered thyself."

Likewise, in the tales "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" the tension between reason and passion within each hero's psyche is externalized in allegorical figures. In "Ligeia" the characters Ligeia and Rowena represent passion and reason. The inevitable takes

place with Rowena falling to Ligeia. And in "Usher,"<sup>8</sup> Madeline (passion) forces the narrator (reason) to abandon the House of Usher (the mind), causing Usher to perish in the tarn. Usher is one of the few characters who is aware of what is happening to him. He sees the reality, the result of the tension between attraction and repulsion as reflected in the decaying mansion, the effect the tarn (abyss) has on the house. He understands the connection between Madeline (attraction-passion) and the tarn and he tries to suppress her, to bury her alive so that he can stop what in reality is unstoppable--his diffusion and return to the original unity of all things.

Whereas the compulsive-confession tales and "Usher," "Ligeia," and "Wilson" are allegories of Perverseness, the sea tales are metaphorical voyages into the abyss to discover more about the nature of Perverseness. In The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, Pym's geographical journey from civilization (Nantucket) to barbarism (Tsalal) to the final white abyss (the South Pole) and also his psychic journey from consciousness to preconsciousness to subconsciousness are a return to simplicity. In the first part of the narrative, Poe examines Perverseness as individual behavior; Pym himself, as an anagram for imp, becomes a symbol for Perversity. In the

<sup>8</sup>The tale "Usher" especially lends itself to an interpretation based on Eureka; see Maurice Beebe, "The Universe of Roderick Usher," in Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert Regan, A Spectrum Book (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 121-133; and Lynen, pp. 229-236.

second half of the narrative, Poe explores Perverseness as collective and endemic to all man; as Pym journeys into his mind, his subconsciousness, the struggle becomes mythic and archetypic as the tension builds between the black and white images. But besides Perverseness on the individual and collective levels, a third exists, a cosmic level foreshadowing the principles Poe sets forth in Eureka. As Pym sails into the white cataract, he views, in the far reaches of the vortex, "flitting and indistinct images." He says, "there came rushing and mighty, but soundless winds, tearing up the enkindled ocean in their course" (Q, II, 852). Pym views within the abyssmal depth the cosmic vortex, the whirling particles subject to the principles of attraction and repulsion. Pym's journey to simplicity, symbolized in the black and white images--attraction and repulsion--is a return to the original Unity of all things--from the "Many" to the "One"--a journey from "multiplicity" to "unity," from "diversity" to "sameness," from "heterogeneity" to "homogeneity." Poe allows Pym a glimpse of cosmic Perverseness. In Pym's vision the "shrouded human figure" (Q, II, 852) standing at the opening of the cataract is the embodiment of the "Oneness" that all men will return to. The whiteness<sup>9</sup> that Pym sees is the same terror-inspiring light as that in Usher's

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of the demonic symbolism of whiteness in Poe and other American writers, see Edward Stone, "The Devil is White," in Essays on Determinism in American Literature, ed. Sydney J. Krause (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1964), 55-66; reprinted in a more detailed form in Voices of Despair (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1966), pp. 79-136.

painting of Madeline's vault and as that "light from out the lurid sea" (Q, I, 44) in the poem "The City in the Sea." In all cases the whiteness of the light suggests the forces of unity against the individual self.

In the other tales in which a hero voyages into the abyss-- "The Descent into the Maelstrom" and "The Pit and the Pendulum"-- as has been suggested, Poe is further investigating the impulse for self-destruction and the return to Unity. These tales differ from the others previously discussed in that the heroes save themselves or appear to save themselves from annihilation. When the heroes relax the tension between reason and passion and embrace self-destruction, they see their means of escape which were always before them. Each hero as an individual self learns that he must give up his self-importance so that he can save himself. The narrator in "The Descent" comes to think "how magnificent a thing" will be his destruction in the maelstrom and, he says, how "foolish" it is "to think of so paltry a consideration as my own individual life, in view of so wonderful a manifestation of God's power." In "The Pit" the narrator ceases in his efforts to save himself and instead turns his attention to an objective analysis of the velocity of the swinging pendulum. In both cases, the heroes, avoiding the separateness of selfhood, turn and identify with the very force that will inevitably destroy them. Although Poe saves these characters from annihilation with a deus ex machina, they will eventually fall to the forces of attraction and repulsion and thus to the original Unity of all things.

Existence for the Poe hero is intimately linked with death, for he only has life, as Lynen points out, "by virtue of his movement toward unity which will at last destroy" him.<sup>10</sup> Within the essence of his being is the "Germ of [his] Inevitable Annihilation" (S, IX, 6, Poe's italics). As he runs from or attempts to bury alive his other self, as he is compelled against his wishes to act out the most hideous of crimes, and as he perches upon the precipice and becomes dizzy, he momentarily encounters and acknowledges the impulse of the Perverse. Although he may appear to be insane, he is not. As Lynen suggests, "the Poe character's compulsive desire for annihilation is not . . . a psychological quirk or even, really, a trait of mind. It is a symptom of the self's ontology."<sup>11</sup> Poe himself directly commented on his idea of the hero, the nature of his existence. He cared little for Carlyle's view of the hero, and in its place, he wrote,

That individuals have so soared above the plane of their race, is scarcely to be questioned; but, in looking back through history for traces of their existence, we would pass over all biographies of 'the good and the great,' while we search carefully the slight records of wretches who died in prison, in Bedlam, or upon the gallows (Q, II, 1053).

This is Poe's idea of the hero: the man who appears to live on the margin between sanity and insanity. From the edge of the precipice he stares into the yawning abyss and for a second, before his inevitable

<sup>10</sup>Lynen, p. 219.

<sup>11</sup>Lynen, p. 220.



destruction, he glimpses reality. What he sees is "the prima mobilia of the human soul" (Q, II, 637), that which causes man to act, to move from a state of stasis to flux, from being to becoming. He sees the impulse of the Perverse as the force which, despite the seeming paradox, establishes his relationship with God and the rest of creation; he sees the force which guarantees the continuation of his creation through the destruction of not only his self but all of matter and which reshapes this matter into a higher form as it moves through the void or abyss to be unified once again with God.

Thus, throughout the tales and finally in Eureka, Poe gradually works toward a definition of his concept of Perverseness. In the fiction, the abyss-like images, associated with Perverseness, take numerous forms, such as a whirlwind, a maelstrom, a tarn, or an eye of a character, and eventually in Eureka Poe concentrates the image into one intellectual pattern, the final abyss of the cosmos itself. Poe's concept of Perverseness becomes the basis for his cosmology. Examining his fictional characters against the background of the individual, collective, and cosmic views of Perverseness provides a perspective for evaluating the evolution of his ideas and demonstrates that Poe in his works anticipated many of the ideas and problems of twentieth-century literature, philosophy, and science.

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