
ABSTRACT

ELDER, MATTHEW STEPHEN. "Never Otherwise Than Analytic": Poe's Science of the Divine. (Under the direction of Allen F. Stein.)

When the writers of the American Romantic period were eschewing the Enlightenment values of reason and objectivity in favor of subjective, individual human experience, Edgar Allan Poe clung to rationality and claimed that it is a vital tool in the creation of art and in the quest for spiritual enlightenment. Critics, however, have long disputed whether Poe sincerely valued science and rationality or if he treated those concepts with irony and destabilized any knowledge that his characters acquire through rational, empirical truth seeking. This thesis seeks to explain how Enlightenment values figure in Poe's vision of art and the cosmos and to dispute the postmodern interpretations that claim that Poe's valorization of rationality and its products (namely science and technology) is ironic. To that end, I investigate, specifically, the connection of Poe's positivistic (rather than phenomenological) philosophy to his theological vision. The successful application of rational principles by Poe's narrators is consistently rendered in language and imagery suggestive of the divine, and it results in the spiritual enlightenment of the characters. Chapter one of this thesis examines Poe's science fiction against the philosophical backdrop established by *Eureka* and "Sonnet – To Science" and argues that as the narrators apply rationality successfully, they come to resemble the God with whom they seek to commune. Chapter two reads Poe's detective tales as allegories assigning cosmic significance to the concepts of reason, embodied by the God-like C. Auguste Dupin, and unreason, embodied by Dupin's adversaries.

“Never Otherwise Than Analytic”: Poe’s Science of the Divine

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BIOGRAPHY

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Introduction

The question of whether Edgar Allan Poe genuinely valued science and rationality has long been a source of debate among critics. This issue certainly has contributed to the extraordinarily wide range of opinions regarding the quality and value of his work as a whole, which has led Floyd Stovall to characterize Poe as “perhaps the most thoroughly misunderstood of all American writers” (172). The current trend in Poe studies—and the one that continues to engender critical contradictions—is to view him as, in the words of Tracy Ware, “a fundamentally ironic writer” (77). Critics in the postmodern tradition now claim Poe as a skeptic of science and rationality and read the science tales as ironic whenever they seem to suggest that reason is a valuable and important tool in the quest for spiritual enlightenment. This reading owes much to poststructuralist theory, which was first applied to Poe studies in Jaques Lacan’s notorious “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter.’” The work, published in 1956, was a statement on language theory that seemed to have little to do with Poe or his works and may have perhaps led, along with the many poststructuralist responses to the article, to Stovall’s later complaint that “much of the criticism of Poe in this century, whether favorable or unfavorable, has been done by people who have not taken the trouble to understand his work” (172). Despite Lacan’s disregard of the author, some critics have gone so far as to contend that the poststructuralist linguistic reading of “The Purloined Letter” is justified by author intent. This indeed has led to the understanding of Poe as a fundamentally ironic writer, skeptical of the reliability of reason and the stability of meaning. As Ware argues, the current debate is between writers who view Poe as ironic and those who view him as “a visionary, or philosophically profound, or in any case a fundamentally *serious* writer”

(77, emphasis mine). That is, Poe was either serious in his valorization of science and rationality, or he has his characters rely on rational method only later to demonstrate that their faith in reason was foolishly misplaced.

The perception of Poe as an ironic writer has led to much being written on the hoaxing aspect clearly evident in some of his works. Too much effort, however, has been made to delineate a “hoaxing genre” in the Poe canon under which, along with “The Balloon Hoax” and “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” critics would like to group even such works of earnest artistic and intellectual achievement as “The Philosophy of Composition” and *Eureka*. The conclusion arrived at by these critics is that they can place him squarely in the Romantic tradition where they feel he belongs, and they can claim him as another critic of wrongheaded Enlightenment thinking. Thus, those critics, such as J. Gerald Kennedy, who regard Poe as fundamentally ironic hold that he centers his narrators’ search for insight and truth on Enlightenment precepts only later to destabilize the narrators’ conclusions and demonstrate that reason ultimately fails them. The textual evidence cited for these interpretations is sometimes specious, made more attractive by the largely imagined hoax *trend* in Poe’s fiction. All too often there is a tendency of some critics now, especially in the case of “The Philosophy of Composition,” to apply to Poe’s writings their own assumptions about art, which results in some major misinterpretations. That is, many cannot fathom an art product created through the rationality and “rigid consequence of a mathematical problem,” so, they believe, one who supposes to have done this can only be hoaxing us. The same is true for other works—*Eureka*, “Mesmeric Revelation,” “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” the detective stories—in which the central conceits are earnest, not ironic.

I do not propose to confront the poststructuralist studies directly, but they have likely contributed to the current misunderstanding of Poe as an ironist. The focus of this study is the tales and essays that address the faculty of reason and the effects and manifestations of it. The concepts of science, knowledge, and rationality are applied in a genuine Enlightenment understanding of them, by Poe's narrators and by Poe himself, in the search for insight and, ultimately, for a divine state of being. Poe's own understanding of the ability of reason to lead one to true insight he states clearly enough in various of his writings. It was a concern central to his aesthetic and epistemological vision as he comments on it repeatedly in his *Marginalia* and other fugitive writings as well as in his works of criticism. The most important delineation of it, however, appears in his detective fiction and in his cosmological treatise, *Eureka*. In short, true insight, according to Poe, can emerge only through the combination of rationality and imagination or intuition. Thus, as only one half of this dialectic for spiritual insight, Enlightenment precepts, as current Poe criticism suggests, indeed *are* limited in their ability to lead a practitioner of them to a stable truth. But the misunderstanding of Poe consists in the practice of interpreting the *limits* as the essential point of Poe's tales of reason (or "ratiocination," to employ the term of which Poe was fond), where the essential point is in fact the *necessity* of reason as a vital part of the dialectic. Although at the time Poe was writing, he often felt it necessary, as in *Eureka*, to defend his use of imagination rather than pure rationality, my desire here is not to argue the relative importance of Enlightenment concepts in Poe's overall vision but rather their indispensableness, as he saw it, in achieving spiritual insight about the material universe.

The tales involving rationality can be profitably categorized according to their specific relationship to that abstract term. One category comprises the tales involving science

and scientific precepts, through which the principle of reason is given material effect. Quite a few of Poe's works bear at least some relation to issues of technology and scientific experimentation or speculation. A number of these works, in fact, are now regarded as having a major influence on the development of the genre now known as science fiction. Poe maintained a lifelong interest in science and especially in that offshoot of science that is perhaps the combination of imagination and rationality that he found so powerful:

pseudoscience. In addressing the works of science and pseudoscience I mean such works as *Eureka*, "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall," and the works of mesmerism, such as "The Facts in the Case of Monsieur Valdemar," and "Mesmeric Revelation." Harold Beaver, in his excellent edited edition of the science fiction tales of Poe, defines the genre broadly, including also "A Descent into the Maelstrom" and the colloquies, which also bear consideration here. The scientific stories and meditations represent a vision of materialism, pantheism, and gnosticism that describes a complex relationship between God and the physical world, having knowledge of which is often associated, in the tales, with divine qualities. The science in Poe's stories is worked through rational interpretation of the surrounding world, and the characters prosper who can apply it correctly.

The science depicted is closely related to another topic that seems to have been of particular interest to Poe, which is the accumulation of knowledge. For Poe's characters and for Poe himself, knowledge reflects the success of rational, empirical inquiry. Like the Enlightenment philosophers, Poe believed that the universe was, in principle, knowable, which reflects his positivistic perspective. He also believed that since God's universe is a complex of rational inter-fitting laws, having knowledge of the universe is also having knowledge of God, and is in itself divine. It is well known that Poe made sometimes

outrageous pretensions to knowledge, arcane and otherwise. In his criticism, *Marginalia*, and most especially his fiction, he demonstrated a remarkable breadth of knowledge on a wide range of topics, and sometimes digressed into explaining, for example, scientific or technical issues at great length and sometimes with great tedium. However, many critics consider it to have been, in large part, an affectation. That is, Poe demonstrated enough knowledge to make it appear he was far more knowledgeable in some topics than he actually was. Clearly, however, the accumulation of knowledge, not just the *appearance* of erudition, was of great importance to him. Some critics, such as Stuart Levine, have pointed out that we may have labeled him a pretender too often: “Poe’s erudition is impressive,” Levine says; “The man knew much more than we have been led to believe,” (xvii) though one wonders when, amid churning out pages of reviews each day, composing his stories and poems, and caring for his ailing wife, he possibly had time to read so much among the many different topics that piqued his interest. The pedantic quality of some of his work, especially the science pieces, also suggests how important it was for him not only to have knowledge, but, like his alter ego Monsieur Dupin, to display it. The accumulation of knowledge, as mentioned above, is also associated with spiritual transcendence (described in language suggestive of the divine), not only in the science pieces as gnosis of the physical world, but also in the “death of the woman” stories as esoteric, arcane, and *forbidden* knowledge. The alluring knowledge that the narrators of these stories pursue—a “knowledge too divinely precious not to be forbidden” (254)—by intense and, as D.H. Lawrence described it, violent analysis of the woman, promises to impart divinity to the narrator if he can but attain it. There are two functions of knowledge, then, for Poe, the distinction between which is blurred to varying degrees in his tales. As a product of scientific inquiry, it can lead one to insight about God

and Truth, but it can also, following the materialism evident in Poe's vision of an incorporate soul, effect spiritual transcendence.

The most important representation of rationality in the Poe canon occurs in the detective tales. Science and knowledge, important terms in defining the different manifestations of Enlightenment values in Poe's works, are functions of the more abstract principle of reason, which is personified in C. Auguste Dupin. The detective tales are grouped separately because while there are issues of forensics present, the tales are not overtly science-oriented; reason serves deductive analytical logic rather than empirical science and technology. Dupin is the Analyst, devising a rational tapestry of answers for a mystery, as Poe is the Analyst, seeking to understand the rational pattern of the universe and reflecting in his art the design he perceives. Here again, however, Poe expresses an Enlightenment concept through images of the divine. Robert Daniel, in the article "Poe's Detective God," sees Dupin depicted as a deity, an embodiment of apotheosized rationality. Daniel observes that Dupin's feats of analysis are described in highly suggestive language—language that implies that powers of analysis are such that they can make you A God Peer¹ if the process of reason is applied correctly. Poe, however, was being less subtle about his designs than Daniel concludes. The amazement of the populace at Dupin's feats is indeed rendered in language that suggests the acts of analysis are nothing less than miraculous, but there is also a deliberate pattern of imagery that suggests that the confrontation between reason and un-reason (or perversity) is nothing less than a battle between good and evil,² and, thus, that to act rationally is to be associated with divine properties.

¹ "A God Peer," Helen Whitman observed, is an anagram for "Edgar Poe."

² Of course, Dupin reminds us that the reason his powers of analysis are so potent is that he has the mind of a poet; intuitive leaps constitute the essential other half of the dialectic.

As readers of *Eureka* know, Poe's universe terminates when all of its elements and atoms return inevitably to the original unity in which lay the secondary cause of all things—a unity consisting of a single *irrelative* particle. At this point the one particle will once again disperse into a universe of inconceivable diversity, only eventually to collapse into annihilation once again. The process continues in eternal recurrence constituting what Poe terms the “heart divine.” Thus, as elements of this universe, we are all, Poe says, “part and parcel of God.” And what method did Poe rely on but reason, in large part, to lead him to his startling pantheistic conclusions? Beauty is Unity, and Unity is Truth, and as Poe's narrators would attest, reason is a vital tool in both apprehending and creating them. The concept of unity was the standard for artistic achievement that permeated Poe's criticism, poetry, fiction, and philosophy, and it is wrought, as he maintained time and again, through rational method. Unity is divine; it is the primordial principle from which springs all other existence—the *irrelative* particle that is God. It was reason that allows the narrator of *Eureka* (the treatise can be considered, in many ways, Poe's fourth Dupin story) to perceive the design of God as, contrary to postmodern interpretations, a stable *irrelative* truth, accessible through positivistic reason. This argument, then, will implicitly confront the postmodern understanding of Poe that has arisen from the poststructuralist interpretations by showing how the exercise of reason and its manifestations in the works of Poe produce and reveal stable meaning. Critics have long considered *Eureka* a primer for understanding the rest of Poe's fiction and poetry, as it is the most developed statement of how Poe's aesthetics relates to his metaphysics, and the work serves here as a foundation for understanding the function of science in the science fiction tales and in the logical analysis of Dupin. The connection between Poe's theological beliefs and his aesthetic beliefs reveals a strong relationship

between reason and divinity, which is what this study will investigate in order to demonstrate that Poe indeed believes in the reliability of rational method. Reason, in all its manifestations and genre applications in the Poe canon, is represented as a vital tool in the path to spiritual insight and transcendence.

Chapter 1

The Consistent Logic of Science and Art

I. Philosophical Beginnings and Endings: “Sonnet – To Science” and *Eureka*

One obstacle for critics trying to track a consistent philosophy in Poe’s writings is the seeming contradiction between Poe’s indictment of the “peering eyes” (ln.2) of science in his early poem “Sonnet – To Science” and his later writings, such as *Eureka*, whose philosophy is based, in large part, on scientific doctrine and methodology. These two works, the sonnet and *Eureka*, make especially suitable points of index for discussing the development of Poe’s philosophy over time; the sonnet, published in 1829 when Poe was just twenty years old, reflects his youthful infatuation with Romantic ideals, and it appears to condemn science for its interference with poetic imagination; science exposes the “dull realities” behind the poet’s fantasies. *Eureka*, published in 1847 at the opposite end of Poe’s career, shows Poe adopting science as a helpful and indeed necessary component of both philosophical insight and poetic force.³ It would seem necessary to reconcile this contradiction in order to argue that Poe’s later acceptance of Enlightenment ideals was sincere and not ironic, the sonnet to science always looming as seemingly a direct refutation of such a proposition. Taking the sonnet in the context of Poe’s oeuvre, however, it is not a poem whose content ultimately needs to be made to match the later work. As his career and aesthetics developed, Poe moved gradually away from the Romantic tradition that inspired him in his youth. His other early poems reflect his devotion to the English Romantics, but it has been described by some as a somewhat naïve devotion and many of his poems of that period—excepting, among others, “Sonnet – To Science,” which Daniel Hoffman considers “worthy to appear beside the great sonnets of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats” (47)—are often derivative and unexceptional. In

³ “To Science” was written at the very beginning of Poe’s career, and in a letter to Maria Clemm often cited by critics Poe considered *Eureka* the end of his career: “It is no use to reason with me *now*; I must die. I have no desire to live since I have done ‘Eureka.’ I could accomplish nothing more” (*The Unknown Poe*, 11).

short, *Eureka* and the other works of science and ratiocination to appear in the 1840's are far removed from Poe's early youthful Romanticism; there was a long maturing process during which Poe's perspective developed and changed, so we should be careful not to place the sonnet next to his later tales without understanding the change in Poe's thought over time.

However, even when he wrote "Sonnet – To Science," Poe was not as averse to scientific thinking as some critics may suggest. A number of critics have observed that Poe maintained a lifelong interest in science, and that to interpret the sonnet only as, in Hoffman's terms, Poe's "fretting against the dominance of the Cartesian mind" is in fact to misinterpret it (49). Benjamin Fisher points out that though the sonnet's presumed attack on science "has become a critical commonplace," close analysis of the poem reveals that it is "the *extremes* of science, not science in the main, [that] thwart the poet and the intuition essential to creative endeavor" (38). Similarly, Harold Beaver notes that "It was not science [Poe] abhorred so much as the triumph of mechanical reason" (xiv), and Christopher Kearns adds that the speaker in the poem is aware that he exists in a relationship with positivistic reason, and rather than rejecting it must strive to adapt it to his search for self-knowledge. "The poet's burden," Kearns observes, "is not simply to recoil from positivistic reason, but to reform it" (74). Speaking of the poet troubled by tyrannical science, the speaker asks, "How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise" (ln. 5). These questions are not rhetorical but suggest that the poet must acknowledge science and bring his fantasies into concord with it.

Interestingly, though the speaker complains of the interference of science, the poem indicates that Poe understood science not as a narrative, in the manner of the poststructuralists, but as a process that reveals what is objectively true. It reflects a positivistic perspective, not the phenomenological one that postmodern critics have read into

Poe's works. Science, as the sonnet suggests, *obstructs* the Romantic ideal of subjective human perception because it reveals an *irrelative* universal order. Poe's movement away from a hostility toward science is not a movement away from a belief about the fundamental nature of science—he always believed, as the sonnet indicates, that science is a way of discovering an objective order; the change in Poe's attitude toward science, as is demonstrated abundantly in the science fiction tales, reflects his eventual belief that truth *is* fantastic and poetic. His tale "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade," in which real scientific discoveries are written as startling, terrifying fantasies, testifies to this philosophical change in Poe. The nature of science remained the same for Poe; it was the value of it that changed.

If we accept the interpretations of Fisher, Kearns, and Hoffman, however, there still remains the obvious conclusion that Poe was clearly more hostile toward science in his early years (even if not to the degree once supposed) than he was at the time of composing *Eureka*. If the sonnet indicates a suspicion of the ways of science, *Eureka* adopts the "Cartesian spirit" (49) as a central conceit, the necessary other component, with the poetic spirit, that constitutes the dialectical formula for true insight. Poe's use of scientific and mathematical precepts in the long cosmological essay, however, has long been derided by scientists and mathematicians. On the other hand, a number of poets have hailed *Eureka* as a masterpiece (if, indeed, a puzzling one) of aesthetic achievement. Peter Swirsky's opinion reflects both sides; for him, the essay indicates that Poe was "negligent of even the most fundamental science," which makes the essay on that level "a failure" (53). At the same time, however, "it is also one of the most ambitious and far-reaching projects ever attempted in philosophy" (Swirsky 27). Such sentiments are typical among scholars approaching this strange work.

While some of Poe's assertions remain indefensible (that our moon is self-luminous, for example),⁴ Swirsky and others have perhaps erred sometimes in evaluating separately Poe's use of two different systems of epistemology that Poe intended to be combined. Paul Valery, confident in the inerrancy of all of Poe's writings,⁵ was more sympathetic, trusting that Poe was aware that he was applying scientific principles by such luminaries as Newton to imaginative fancy in ways that defied traditional understanding of those principles. Swirsky, for instance, faults Poe for applying laws of mechanics to issues of spirituality that have nothing to do with mechanics. (David Hume, however, a philosopher with far greater credentials than Poe, applied Newton's gravitational theory as an analogue for the association of ideas in the human brain). That Poe actually misapprehended Newton's laws is debatable, but if his synthesis of science and imagination is sometimes infelicitous, it may be the unavoidable result of essaying such a monumental task as reconciling the antithetical disciplines of poetry and philosophy. At least, that is how Charles Schaeffer characterizes the purpose of *Eureka*; Poe, he says, came ever so close to accomplishing that reconciliation, something "few in the history of literature and criticism have" managed (354). The entire tradition of Enlightenment philosophy, after all, attempted no less an awkward task in trying to transform philosophy wholly into a matter of natural science.

The importance of *Eureka* in the Poe canon, however, has been increasingly appreciated, and many regard it now as the central work of Poe's career. While its

⁴ Though historically scientists have not been kind to *Eureka*, Poe's scientific insights have, surprisingly, been gaining respectability. He is now credited by some with "pre-discovering" that the universe is expanding, and is cited in some textbooks for that achievement. Of course, at the time Poe had no evidence, only a logical deduction based on his attempt to resolve Olber's paradox. It was Einstein who would later confirm with evidence Poe's intuition. Valery, incidentally, considered Poe's insights natural precursors to those of Einstein. According to Burton Pollin, "astrophysicists very recently have commended [*Eureka*] for predicting black holes, pulsar stars, and an expanding-contracting Universe, and for explaining the paradox of the dark sky at night" (19).

⁵ Valery writes in a letter to Andre Gide, "Poe...is the only writer without any fault. He never makes a false move..." (qtd. by Eric Carlson, *Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe* 102).

importance in the disciplines of either philosophy or physics may ultimately be negligible, *Eureka*'s literary significance is probably commensurate with the final value of Poe's aesthetic vision as a whole. If readers do not share his estimation of the centrality of unity in the functioning of the universe, they can hardly dispute his commitment to that principle and the consistent and mostly successful application of it to his art. The historical uncertainty regarding Poe's lasting value is referable mostly to an uncertainty about the value of his aesthetics, the connection of unity to which many have considered a misapplication (or at least a superficial application) of principle to purpose. That Poe was largely unconcerned with commenting on earthly human issues and social problems may be the reason why many have felt so uneasy about taking him with more than a certain degree of seriousness and placing him among our greatest writers. As Rosenheim and Rachman express it, the "critical dismissal of Poe has followed from Poe's own seeming disengagement with American culture..." (ix). If this is true, then *Eureka* is the piece most harmful to Poe's reputation, with the possible exception of "The Philosophy of Composition," which to some is a seminal aesthetic statement and to others a laughable farce. *Eureka* is the culmination of Poe's aesthetic vision and it is his conclusion that the spiritual quest for beauty is really the only important human endeavor. Achieving unity of effect in art products may be important in crafting coherent, powerful, and didactic comments on social issues, but for Poe it served a far different purpose.

Joan Dayan refers to *Eureka* as Poe's "call to cosmological gnosis." The syllogistic logic for Poe's interest in science is this: if the fundamental principle of all matter is, as Poe suggests, a tendency to unity, and unity is divine presence, then the divine is manifest in the physical world. Critics such as Stuart Levine have generally maintained that Poe's

philosophy bears many resemblances to that of Emerson, and the pantheistic belief in the manifest divinity of matter is common to both writers. But while Emerson famously maintained that the search for philosophical truth must tack in different and contradictory directions, Poe was determined that *only* in perfect consistency is truth to be found. The author of the fictional epistle that begins *Eureka* says,

...is it not an evidence of the mental slavery entailed upon those bigoted people by their Hogs and Rams, that in spite of the eternal prating of their savans about *roads* to Truth, none of them fell, even by accident, into what we now so distinctly perceive to be the broadest, the straightest and most available of all mere roads – the great thoroughfare – the majestic highway of the *Consistent*? Is it not wonderful that they should have failed to deduce from the works of God the vitally momentous consideration that a *perfect consistency can be nothing but an absolute truth*? (219)

We know a truth when we see it because the elements that constitute it will be wholly consistent with one another. Scott Peeples suggests that Poe “stakes his claim to truth on his theory’s consistency” because he does not provide scientific or mathematical proofs to support his theories (162). He speaks largely through intuition, supported by deductive logic, and admits that “according to the schools, I *prove* nothing” (238). Of course, this is clearly part of Poe’s design; a purely mathematical or scientific proof could not account for the spiritual side of his dialectical philosophy. Moreover, the intuitive leaps that Poe says are required at the threshold between material and spiritual knowledge cannot be codified in a language of mathematics, though it is indeed the scientific languages, in which the designs of the *material* world are described, that lead us to that threshold at all. As John Tresch expresses it, for Poe “Writing, reason, and other technologies are...tools we use to cross the intermediate zone between man and God” (121). Kepler, after whose work Poe models his own approach, is said by Poe to have *guessed* his most profound insights in a process that involved making the necessary intuitive leap and thereupon sifting the intuited conclusions,

clearing “them, little by little, of their chaff of inconsistency,” until all that remains is a perfect consistency and, hence, an “absolute and unquestionable Truth” (*Eureka* 219).

Poe founds his methodical epistemology on the concepts of unity and consistency, but his method for perceiving consistency relies, especially in *Eureka* but also throughout his other works, on analogical process for verifying truth claims. For Poe, “each law of nature is dependent at all points upon all other laws,” and this reciprocal dependency, the *modus operandi* of which is the law of gravity, is fundamental in understanding the relationship between reality and our perception of reality. His “Mesmeric Revelation,” one of the colloquy preludes to *Eureka*, indicates an awareness, akin to that of Plato and Bacon, of the discrepancy between perception and reality: the “external world is, to the rudimental life, limited, through the idiosyncrasy of its organs” (4: 251). Despite Poe’s criticism of “Hog” in *Eureka*, this passage reflects a Baconian perspective. Also like Bacon, and Plato, Poe felt that this barrier could, to some degree, be overcome through the application of reason. As Poe would understand it, the relative discrepancy between a claim and the truth it proposes to represent should be equal to (and hence, can be deduced from) other claims and the realities they represent. This is demonstrated especially in the relationships between cause and effect, a perfect consistency between which will reveal a reciprocity of adaptation, which is the design of the material world and should be reflected in works of art that would presume to elevate the soul of the audience. As Poe avers in “The Philosophy of Composition,” “it is an obvious rule of art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes” (107). In *Eureka* and “The Power of Words” he goes on to suggest deterministically that anyone with enough perspicacity and facility with logic and reason to discern the progression of causes and effects would be able to predict the future. That is, since effects in the material world spring

rationally from specific causes, all effects can be predicted. The results of any impulse, as Poe writes in “The Power of Words, are “accurately traceable through the agency of algebraic analysis” (5: 142).

Poe, however, despite his claims to profound originality, was not the first to articulate a philosophy of deterministic causality. Laplace, forty to fifty years before Poe, theorized that the consistency of causal processes, observed in the physical world, leads to the conclusion that every event is predetermined. Of course, Laplace’s theory, and Poe’s adaptation of it, were devised before quantum theory, formulated by Planck and manifested in Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, revealed to us early in the twentieth century that the same effects do not always spring from the same causes, which effectively debunked deterministic causality and makes Poe’s reliance on analogy and observed ratio as a path to truth a bit more problematic. But Poe is committed to his theory, and the miraculous powers of Auguste Dupin rely in large part on the detective’s ability to discern with precision what the effect of each cause will be. The character of Agathos from “The Power of Words” describes a figure with such powers: “...to a being of infinite understanding—one to whom the *perfection* of the algebraic analysis lay unfolded—there could be no difficulty in tracing every impulse given the air—and the ether through the air—to the remotest consequences at any even infinitely remote epoch of time” (5: 142). “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” in fact begins with Dupin making a virtuoso demonstration of his oracular ability to tell the future when he predicts the train of thought of his decidedly less gifted sidekick.

Returning, however, to Poe’s use of the reciprocal relationship of all elements to all other elements as the basis for a system of epistemology, a selection of some passages from *Eureka* can be revealing:

What I assume is, simply, that an effect is the measure of its cause – that every exercise of the Divine Will will be proportional with that which demands the exertion – that the means of Omnipotence, or of Omniscience, will be exactly adapted to its purposes. (250)

Poe here concedes that some may say that he is making an unwarranted assumption, but it is an assumption ultimately justified by the existence of a similar relationship between cause and effect as witnessed in the material world:

...the number of light particles (or, if the phrase be preferred, the number of light-impressions) received upon the shifting plane, will be *inversely* proportional with the squares of the distances of the plane. Generalizing, yet again, we may say that the diffusion – the scattering – the radiation, in a word – is *directly* proportional with the squares of the distances. (242)

Every atom, of every body, attracts every other atom, both of its own and of every other body, with a force which varies inversely as the squares of the distances between the attracting and attracted atom. (234)

The amount of electricity developed on the approximation of two bodies, is proportional with the difference between the respective sums of the atoms of which the bodies are composed. (232)

This language is strikingly similar to some employed by Poe in describing, in “The Philosophy of Composition,” how artistic merit is achieved in poetry:

The extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit – in other words, to the excitement or elevation – again, in other words, to the degree of the true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing; for it is clear that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect. (106)

...it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes – that objects should be obtained through means best adapted for their attainment. (107)

Such passages indicate the faith that Poe has in the observations of ratio, proportion, and analogy as methods for arriving at fixed and verifiable truths. If the Enlightenment effort

was to turn philosophy into natural science, then Poe's effort, and perhaps his strongest claim to originality, was to fold art into this equation, though this idea certainly descends in some measure from the Aristotelian unities. In a *Marginalia* entry, Poe identifies the level of our pleasure in a properly wrought work of art as commensurate with the degree to which the work approximates cosmic design. The unity of the natural world, described in the language of science, is the property of divine volition, and if our central immortal instinct is the desire to perceive beautiful unity, then those who can approximate the divine order of the cosmos in a work of art according to logical and scientific rationale necessarily approximate God. As Poe says, the reciprocal relationship between cause and effect, observed in ratio and proportion, and perceived through analogy, indicates the ultimate unity of any artistic enterprise:

The pleasure which we derive from any exertion of human ingenuity is in the direct ratio of the *approach* to this species of reciprocity between cause and effect. In the construction of *plot*, for example, in fictitious literature, we should aim at so arranging the points, or incidents, that we cannot distinctly see, in respect to any one of them, whether that one depends from any other, or upholds it. In this sense, of course, perfection of plot is unattainable *in fact*, --because Man is the constructor. The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is a Plot of God. (16:10)

Like Francis Bacon, Poe felt that rationality—which is manifested in mathematics, logic, and science—properly wielded can produce accurate perceptions of the surrounding world. Thus if we construct art with the same rationality that we use to perceive divine order, we associate ourselves with the divine act and perhaps even attain, to some degree, a portion of that divinity. Though Poe associates artistic creation with divine creation, as he does briefly in his other metaphysical ruminations “Mesmeric Revelation” and “The Power of Words,” it is not the transcendence of the artist, but the application of rational method (combined with intuition) that approximates God.

This study aims not to investigate all the scientific threads in *Eureka*, but to indicate the central conceit of the work, the primacy of consistency, and its relationship to Enlightenment precepts. Though Poe criticized the Enlightenment philosophers' use of only two methods of truth seeking, Empirical (or inductive) and Formal (or deductive), and their application of them independently of each other, he employs those methods, especially deduction, extensively in his argument. Some have criticized him for this, suggesting that he employs the same methods he disavows early in his argument and thus damages the unity of the work. Poe's misgivings about these methods, however, did not derive from doubts about their worth but from what he saw as the wrongheaded reliance on a *single* method for discovering truths.⁶ Poe was not the first to have this insight, though; Kant was the one initially to determine that the transformation of philosophy into natural science was not succeeding, through induction or deduction, as the Enlightenment philosophers had expected it to. But Poe inherited Enlightenment ideals, especially by way of his alliance with classical literatures and ideologies, and, as Stephen Peithman observes, he was critical of the vagueness and generalities of the early Romantic philosophic responses to Enlightenment thinking. Darlene Unrue argues in "Edgar Allan Poe: The Romantic as Classicist" that Poe "measured [the] Romantic stance detrimentally against the objectivity and rationality of the Classical" (112). He extended his skepticism to the Transcendentalists, whom he accused of engaging in obscurantism and mysticism for the sake of being obscure and mystical. Accordingly, his design is not to defend his use of science and logic, but to propose the use of *intuition* in bridging the gaps left by Enlightenment methodology. As I have indicated, though, amid the current postmodern interpretations of Poe, the important issue to understand

⁶ But of course, Poe did claim that there were no self-evident truths, and critics have noted that Poe indeed assumes some self-evident truths in the course of his argument. Poe does, however, see value in the method of induction as a way of corroborating truths arrived upon through deduction.

is that Poe took logic largely for granted as a necessary method for devising a metaphysics that encompasses both philosophy and art.

While *Eureka* was the fullest expression of Poe's philosophy, he had been developing bits and pieces of it for years in other short pieces that are often grouped with his science fiction. "Mesmeric Revelation," whose suggestive title embodies the tale's primary theme of material and spiritual unity, is something of a dry run for *Eureka*. The story is one of Poe's tales of mesmerism, a pseudoscientific discipline that seemed especially to have interested him. In it, an ailing patient is under the care of a physician who administers drugs to him and sometimes puts him in a mesmeric state to alleviate his suffering. The patient finds that he is capable of much greater depth of insight while in the mesmeric trance. More specifically, the "mesmeric exaltation enables [him] to perceive a train of ratiocination" not perceptible in his normal state. The mesmerist converses with his patient on the nature of God, and it is here that Poe largely establishes his pantheistic philosophy; God exists as unparticled matter, which is necessarily indivisible and which "not only permeates all things, but impels all things; and thus *is* all things within itself" (4: 246). The patient concludes that "God, with all the powers attributed to spirit, is but the perfection of matter" (4: 248). Eventually, the patient, Vankirk, expires and the physician attempts to revive him, but Vankirk resists the attempt, smiling blissfully at having reached a new spiritual existence through his keen perception, made possible by scientific inquiry. As Dawn Sova points out, Vankirk's name means "of the church," which suggests that, through his insights, Vankirk has achieved communion and unity with the deity. The tale explicitly connects pseudoscience with spiritual insight, which is essentially Poe's motivation for developing the science fiction genre.

The other dialogue tales, conversations between spirits in a post-apocalyptic universe, establish other central ideas that are combined and expanded upon in *Eureka*. In “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” the titular main characters discuss the transition that occurs during death, and the unity into which they were subsumed after that process. “The Power of Words” describes the interdependency of all elements in the universe and the order of cause and effect that demonstrates that dependency; hence, the story obliquely advances the existence of deterministic causality. These tales are consistently grouped with Poe’s science fiction efforts, but they are, in the end, a medium for expressing chunks of Poe’s ever-developing metaphysics. The more recognizable science fiction efforts, however, are no less philosophical, and they embody, more so than the colloquies, the essential path to true insight—a combination of material *and* spiritual inquiry. The desire to merge science with spiritual exploration was the impetus for the development of science fiction by Poe, and it remains the main quality that justifies the existence of the genre and the use of it by the many science fiction writers whom Poe has influenced.

II. Hoaxes and Science Fiction

Poe’s role in the development of the genre of modern science fiction, though substantial, is difficult to characterize. Daniel Hoffman generously calls science fiction a genre Poe “invented and bequeathed” to the host of later science fiction pioneers like Jules Verne and Ray Bradbury (151). These writers, among others, Hoffman considers more successful in their development of that genre, but most of them, especially Verne, whose novel *Le Sphinx des Glaces* is a sequel to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, have expressed their debt to Poe. A number of writers, indeed, have applied the appellation

“inventor” in their estimation of Poe’s role in the development of the genre. Maurice Bennett says Poe “endowed [the genre] with its basic form: an emphasis on fact as defined and retrieved by empirical science, the analogical application of this fact to that portion of the universe which remains unknown, and a focus on the interstellar world opened to man by the achievements of modern astronomy” (137). This description serves to illustrate how clearly Poe’s method, the seeking of *fact* through empirical science, is an extension of Enlightenment values. Poe’s works differ from earlier science-themed fiction works, such as Shelly’s *Frankenstein* or Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, in that Poe was the first to offer a scientific rationale for the extraordinary that was actually *plausible* and largely accurate, which aligned him with the rigid and precise ideologies of the Enlightenment scientists and philosophers. This suggests that, though Poe was perhaps the first to apply plausible scientific knowledge and methodology to fiction, the most accurate and productive way to evaluate Poe’s achievement is from the perspective of Enlightenment and even Classical philosophy, rather than from the perspective of the genre as it developed subsequent to Poe’s creation of it.

There is some uncertainty about exactly which of Poe’s works can be categorized as science fiction, but for this study it can be helpful to look to later assessments of the genre that were based largely on Poe’s work with science and fantasy in his fiction. In his “Poe: The ‘Virtual’ Inventor, Practitioner, and Inspirer of Modern Science Fiction,” Burton Pollin, with praise similar to Bennett’s, argues that Poe “had the genius to sketch out almost all later developments in science fiction, down to the present” (18). Pollin catalogues the science fiction elements of each of Poe’s stories using the criteria established by Hugo Gernsbach for

the pioneering science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories*. Gernsbach, who, incidentally, coined the term “science fiction,” categorizes as part of that genre

- a. Tales using scientific data, including advances in technology
- b. Tales of remote places on earth or in outer space, now actually explorable
- c. Richly detailed accounts of the distant, even prehistoric past of mankind or
- d. Accounts of the technologically advanced future. These views can be utopian (that is, of an improved and happier future) or dystopian (that is, of a deteriorated, usually war-torn future. (18)

Pollin then counts thirty-nine tales by Poe that fall within the science fiction genre, describing which aspects of science appear in each one. This is an even broader grouping than Harold Beaver’s, but many of the tales that Pollin categorizes as science fiction include scientific elements that play only a minor role in the story. Given Gernsbach’s criteria, however, a number of tales, such as the colloquies, “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*,⁷ not normally recognizable as science fiction in the common modern understanding of the genre, bear consideration as part of this major strain in the Poe canon.

What interests modern critics the most about Poe’s science fiction, it seems, is the hoaxing quality that appears in a number of the tales. Many of the science and science fiction tales, *Pym*, “Valdemar,” “Mesmeric Revelation,” “Hans Pfaall,” “The Balloon Hoax,” and “Von Kempelen and His Discovery” are framed as legitimate accounts of extraordinary events. Recent misinterpretations of Poe’s purpose with the hoax tales, however, have perhaps led to the belief that he was more fascinated with hoaxing than he actually was. Many have noted that Poe craved attention and was happy when he was able to cause a stir with the reading public. That Poe was delighted with the sensation “The Balloon Hoax”

⁷ Robert Louis Stevenson, “in reviewing the stories of Jules Verne (in 1876), said, “His heroes are in advance of contemporary science like Poe’s Von Kempelen, [or] are bound for the Pole like Arthur Gordon Pym, [or] go to the moon like Hans Pfaall, or descend [into] the Maelstrom like the Norway fisher[man]” (Pollin 19).

caused when it was published as a true account of a transatlantic balloon flight reflects, at least to some degree, this desire for public notoriety. Moreover, the tone of the hoax is often a by-product of some other intent; that is to say, Poe's chief aim was not to hoax. His response, after all, to those who took "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" as a sincere medical account of a mesmeric episode, was to disabuse them of that notion; "It contains not one word of truth," he told a mesmerist who was duped by the tale. Clearly, Poe was amused by the public's gullibility, but as Hoffman and Levine argue, the hoodwinking of the public was not the *raison d'être* for the pieces displaying hoaxing qualities.

According to Hoffman, whose assessment of Poe's hoaxing style seems accurate, one reason we can assume that the hoax is incidental to some other purpose is that Poe's *tone* in the scientific pieces betrays his fascination with the topics he is writing about. In "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall," an influential work now regarded by many as the first modern science fiction story,⁸ Hoffman notices a distinct disunity of style between the narrative of the farcical framing device, which reflects bemusement at the public's incredulous reaction to sensational happenings (in the story, the arrival of the balloon, and, metanarratively, the gullibility of the reading public in believing this and other stories published for sensational effect) and the narrative of the journey itself, which is a pedantic mix of science and pseudoscience written with earnestness and precision. For this disunity, critics have historically regarded this piece as one of Poe's less successful efforts. The tone of the scientific passages of other pieces, however, remains consistent; as Hoffman observes, it is the *tone*, clearly betraying Poe's interest in the topic, that reveals to us that the hoaxing quality, which is often a by-product of the verisimilar style, is partly a peripheral effect of

⁸ According to Maurice Bennet in "Poe and the Tradition of Lunar Speculation," "Poe's tale is often regarded as a ground-breaking exercise in [science-fiction] writing insofar as he relies on science to create the aura of logicity that he emphasizes in his other 'ratiocinative' tales" (144).

Poe's real purpose. Brett Zimmerman has written about the many rhetorical devices employed by Poe, cataloguing them and demonstrating where they appear in Poe's works. He considers Poe to have named and developed one of these devices, the "plausible and verisimilar" style (638), which Poe several times identified as an indispensable quality of effective rhetoric. One explanation for this is that a verisimilar prose serves, along with the mathematical consideration of structural cause and effect, further to imitate and reflect the ordered design of the material world. Though Poe perhaps first developed the verisimilar style for fiction works, (which became a key rhetorical device for the science fiction genre), it was an adaptation of the style of mimesis so valued by the Enlightenment writers; the eighteenth-century writers sought to reflect in their writing the precision and order they perceived in the world around them. For applying rhetorical mimesis to his new genre's format, Poe is credited by Richard Gerber with inventing what he calls "fantastic realism" – the verisimilar providing a logical, rational underpinning for the fantastic content. Poe did not necessarily want readers to be fooled by his scientific descriptions of the world; he wanted them to be awed by the descriptions, as he was awed by the grandeur and order of a universe meticulously plotted by God.

An important responsibility of the science fiction writer in general, it would seem, is to make the reader believe that a fantastic world such as that depicted is entirely plausible. According to Pollin, "every effective piece of science fiction, or any other type of fiction, is a temporary hoax, an *unwilling* suspension of disbelief" (20). Poe engendered this suspension of disbelief in his reader by employing plausible scientific facts and explanations, which suitably accounts for the hoax quality of the science fiction pieces. Hence, it is only the science pieces in the Poe canon that are usually classified as hoaxes. As Poe demonstrated in

his “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Sheherzade,” in which common scientific facts are presented as fantastical and supernatural, and as the epigraph to the tale observes, “truth is stranger than fiction.” By reversing this approach in the science fiction pieces, Poe presents the fantastical and supernatural content as scientifically explainable phenomena, expressing it in scientific or mathematical terms, which forces us to admire the majesty of a highly ordered and rational universe.

Levine, on the other hand, also has a valid explanation for why we should not make too much of or misconstrue Poe’s hoaxing proclivities. When the Romantic philosophical responses to Enlightenment thinking permeated literature, Poe was skeptical of the generalities and obscurantism of those responses and was not ready to eschew rational principles. This put him at odds with his contemporaries and made for a suitable atmosphere to “invent” science fiction, but such an interest in science topics may have been, to some degree, embarrassing for Poe. Levine suggests that veiling the science pieces with a hoax quality allowed Poe to indulge his fascination in science, and especially pseudoscience, which, then and now, has been the stuff of popular culture trivialism. According to Levine, the scheme

enabled him to commit himself to the material as fully as he wished without embarrassment, for the more convincing he made the adventure, the better the hoax. I feel, in other words, that the hoaxing itself was not his sole motive for producing the story. The material itself was attractive to him. [...] Yet this must have seemed trivial stuff for a man who professed dedication to the high seriousness of his artist’s calling. Still...it was fascinating. Perhaps one could indulge, yet demonstrate one’s detachment by hiding oneself in some manner. (129)

John Tresch echoes this sentiment in discussing Poe’s reputation, observing that “some critics have used Poe’s ‘vulgar’ interest in machines as a case for excluding him from ‘high

literature’” (116).⁹ Levine goes on to point out, like Hoffman, how genuine Poe sounds when writing about matters of science. If, as a younger writer, Poe felt a need to disguise his interest in science in order to fit in with his romantic predecessors and contemporaries, as he came into his own, his writings began to betray that interest more overtly. Beyond his creative writings, one can cite his fifteen articles on cryptography written for *Alexander’s Weekly Messenger* in 1839-40 and his challenge to the readers of that paper to send him their own cryptograms, most of which he successfully decoded. There are also a number of *Marginalia* entries dealing with reason and rationality as well as several about such contemporary pseudo-scientific topics as phrenology, metempsychosis, and mesmerism, aspects from all of which found their way into quite a number of Poe’s stories. We cannot dismiss Poe’s science, as some would like, as a tool for hoaxing. Nor can we reasonably separate his science from his more traditionally romantic and gothic art. Levine suggests there are two Poes, Poe-the-Artist and Poe-the-Scientist, and that to evaluate Poe’s work accurately, they must be separated, but that is not so, for if we take “The Philosophy of Composition” seriously, as we must, who is the author of “The Raven” but a scientist? Moreover, science was only one brand of the more fundamental concepts of reason and logic that served all of Poe’s art, in construct if not in content.

The importance of the hoax genre in the Poe canon has been unduly inflated to some extent, as I’ve mentioned, but while the hoax tone is largely incidental, there is perhaps a more conscious purpose for it, but one that *affirms* the value of rational method, not

⁹ It is in some ways curious that critics have been so ready to accede that Poe “invented” science fiction, but the explanation may be that, while we will give Poe credit for originality, science fiction, like detective fiction, is, notably, not considered an enterprise of high art. Contrast this with the symbolist movement, whose beginnings we trace just as clearly to Poe, but which we are not as comfortable *crediting* to him. The explanation for this, certainly, is referable to so many sentiments, expressed by Whitman, James, Eliot, et al., that while Poe is dazzling and entertaining, he is not ultimately profound and important.

undercuts it. Current theory seems to suggest that the hoax was Poe's method for representing the instability of meaning and the impossibility of making accurate perceptions in an unpredictable and chaotic world. The hoax veneer of the works indeed may be a way to raise epistemological questions of what we know and how we can know it, but Poe never suggests that meaning is unavailable; he in fact develops a reasonably complete epistemological vision throughout his works—making a treatise of it *Eureka*—concluding, as Bacon did, that our senses and other faculties can be easily deceived, but that the correct application of reason can overcome obstacles to determining truth. The stories can be related, then, to the topic of cryptography, which Poe was, for a time, greatly interested in, and which he considered to be closely tied to innate human rationality and its ability to discover meaning. In this way, the hoax bears a fundamental relationship to questions of epistemology that were of special importance to Poe late in his career.

The hoax was, for Poe, a challenge to the audience akin to the challenge he made for his readers to deliver to him codes that he would decipher and publish. Poe was especially intrigued by the hoax of Maelzel's automaton chess player, a spectacle popular in his day and for many years previous in which a machine, an automaton, appeared to play chess with a volunteer from an audience. No doubt Poe perceived Maelzel's automaton chess player as a challenge to his own rational abilities, and his essay deciphering step by step the method behind the spectacle of the mechanical chess player was his engaging in a specialized coded conversation with the inventor of the automaton. As Poe saw it, the inventor spoke to him in code and he deciphered that code in order to discover its true nature, just as Poe made a spectacle of deciphering and discovering the true meaning of the encoded texts that his readers sent to him. The discourse between the one who encodes the information and the one

who decodes it is a discourse that Poe proposes with the hoax pieces as well as his science and detective pieces. Poe speaks in a specialized language to his readers, and if they are hoaxed by his tricks and machinations then they are not of the perspicacious elect. As Poe avers in “The Gold Bug,” there is not a code developed through human ingenuity that human ingenuity cannot decipher. The hoaxes, then, in addition to the straightforward science pieces, are pieces written in code, a specialized language that calls on the rational ingenuity of the audience to decipher in the same way that Poe deciphered the code of the automaton chess player and unraveled the hoax.

As J.A. Leo Lemay observes, the detective tales are devised with similar purpose. Lemay suggests that the detective tales comprise a fabric of arcane references, literary tricks and devices, and formal puzzles that Poe challenges us to discover. And with this in mind, his comment that the stories contain more an *air* of ingenuity than ingenuity itself suggests to us that Dupin is merely our model for how to decipher Poe’s literary codes; we are to follow the example of Dupin. This fabric of puzzles and allusions, like the soraismus of scientific jargon, is again Poe’s specialized language, a code devised through his own ingenuity meant to be deciphered through an equal exercise of rational ingenuity. This challenge occurs throughout the Poe canon, and the hoax pieces are one iteration of this purpose. The importance of the hoax tales, then, should not be inflated based on the misinterpretation of them as demonstrations of misperception. These considerations can serve to illuminate our interpretations of the science fiction tales.

“The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall,” first published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in June of 1835, several years before Poe’s period of concentrated interest in science and logic, is the story whose hoax elements and sincere scientific elements

are the most difficult to disentangle. The tale, in addition to assuming a hoaxing air, is also a comment on hoaxing. The public, as a character in the story, perpetrates the hoax on itself. The narrative opens with a balloon descending upon the city of Rotterdam. Notably, the balloon is shaped like “a huge fool’s cap turned upside down,” and appears to be “manufactured entirely of dirty newspapers” (1: 44). Poe undoubtedly by this time had a good understanding of the publishing industry, and the power of the journals and papers to manipulate the populace. Poe may here be poking fun at the populace for being so trusting of the stories to appear in journals and papers, indicating that the mass of people, whose collective intelligence he viewed rather pessimistically, do not engage their sense of innate rationality to the degree of which they are capable. Poe’s reading public mistake fiction for truth when they are duped by the science fiction hoaxes, and the citizens of Rotterdam in “Pfaall” mistake truth for fiction; they seem to think the letter detailing Pfaall’s exploits is a hoax after it is dropped from the balloon by a squat, dwarfish looking character. Finally, we read in the letter that Pfaall’s unparalleled adventure began on April 1, the day that fools are hoaxed. All of this clearly enough indicates Poe’s awareness of the environment he is writing in, but there is not enough evidence to suggest that the hoax genre, as some critics claim, represents that Poe believed it was impossible to make accurate perceptions. On the contrary, the duped citizens are fools, who refuse, unlike Poe, to evaluate events in a rational way. Poe used rational induction to expose the hoax of Maelzel’s chess player, and the public should do the same to discover the true purpose of Poe’s science fiction. The scientist Pfaall escapes the terrestrial boundaries and ascends to the heavens while the foolish citizens are trapped on the ground. The story indeed valorizes science and rationality as methods of discovering truth.

There are three stories, “Hans Pfaall” being one of them, in which the scientific machinations or ingenuity of the main character serve as a metaphor for rebirth or ascendance, the latter of which is the theme of “Hans Pfaall.” Clearly, the opening and ending of the story, as Hoffman observes, are farcical in tone, but those sections bear no relation to the central metaphor. Poe operates his ascendance metaphor through scientific language, most of which, according to Levine, is accurate. As the ironically named Pfaall ascends to the heavens, he makes an extensive record of his scientific observations and mathematical calculations, which Poe takes pains to ensure are reasonably accurate, at least according to the knowledge available to him. The complexity of the mathematical equations employed by Pfaall is certainly impressive to an amateur; as others have noted, however, Poe was indeed a competent mathematician, having excelled in that field in college. He continued to pursue mathematics independently after college and appears to have been fascinated by the ability to perceive the world’s material order by reading the unique language of mathematics, which Poe saw as comparable, if not superior to, any other form of language in its relationship to special knowledge. Poe expected, through his prodigious use of soraismus in the tales, to demonstrate his own specialized knowledge¹⁰ and to challenge his readers to acquire that knowledge. The acquisition of such knowledge, after all, is a trend in Poe’s fiction that is consistently connected thematically to the elevation of the soul; it is, according to Agathos in “The Power of Words,” the source of our happiness (5: 139). Poe’s mathematic pedantry in Hans Pfaall, as well as in *Eureka* and other pieces, we must interpret as another form of soraismus, the reading of which is associated with the discovery of order in the material world. And as we see, that discovery is associated, in this tale, with ascension. Pfaall

¹⁰ At the University of Virginia, Poe was enrolled in the schools of modern and ancient languages. He was ranked at the top of his class for his linguistic abilities.

is propelling his ascension through his scientific acumen, improvising solutions to problems that arise, and periodically discharging ballast, based on his judgment of atmospheric conditions, to accelerate his ascent.

Poe, following a materialistic philosophy, suggests in “Pfaall” that there is a clear relationship between material gnosis and divine ascension. Pfaall’s name in fact may further reinforce this relationship. The Bonaparte observation that the name obviously suggests “phallus” is not one I’m entirely ready to dismiss, but more interesting and pertinent is the seemingly straightforward ironic quality of it. Poe deals with many different and complex types of knowledge, not the least important of which is knowledge of the forbidden sort, represented, in “Ligeia” and “Morella” and other stories, by his doomed heroines. We get the sense that for Poe the attainment of knowledge is, curiously, both destruction and transcendence, a theme investigated in “A Descent into the Maelstrom.” Sometimes it is one or the other, and sometimes it is both, and we get a hint of that here. The knowledge to which Poe often alludes was that obtained in the Garden of Eden. The serpent promised knowledge of God, but the knowledge resulted in the fall of man, and Poe, intrigued perhaps by that paradox suggests that knowledge is a divine thing, but is also, if misapplied, a dangerous thing.¹¹ It is for this reason that we don’t know if the narrator of “A Descent in the Maelstrom” is plunging down into divine knowledge or into oblivion, and in the case of Hans Pfaall we are unsure if it is oblivion he is flying into; does his name suggest that his acquisition of knowledge will lead to his fall, as it did for Eden’s inhabitants, or does it suggest the duality of knowledge and the danger of a knowledge misapplied and that Pfaall is indeed hurrying onto an exciting knowledge to which the rest of us are not privy?

¹¹ The latter of these possibilities, as I will discuss in chapter 2, is the thematic center of Poe’s stories, such as “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat,” in which the clearly insane narrators believe they are acting rationally but are not.

We look perhaps to one of Poe's earliest poems for an answer. "Al Aaraaf," published in 1829, is Poe's longest and most challenging poem. It clearly bears many similarities to *Eureka* in its length, complexity, and philosophical concerns. Thomas Ollive Mabbott points out that "It has been remarked that 'Al Aaraaf' foreshadows *Eureka* of 1848, but there Poe attempted to make his ideas conform to current scientific ideas, as he understood them" (94). Some critics, however, have suggested that this early poem represents Poe's combination of science and spiritual exploration because he sought inspiration for the poem from the discipline of astronomy. In the note accompanying the poem, Poe explains that Tycho Brahe discovered a new light in the sky that shone brilliantly for a period and then disappeared inexplicably. This star Poe takes to represent the Arabian concept of "Al Aaraaf," a point midway between heaven and hell, which Poe adapts for his own usage. Inhabiting the star, which is a messenger star from God, are purveyors of ideal beauty, the most prominent of which is Angelo, an angelic characterization of Michaelangelo. Hoffman suggests this is the only place Hans Pfaall could be headed: "where should we think Hans Pfaall has arisen to, what planet is that where he will 'leave the world yet continue to exist,' but Tycho Brahe's star, 'Al Aaraaf? That's moon enough, the only moon where such things can be" (156). We may even suspect that Poe provides a cue for this association in the name Pfaall, which vaguely echoes the name of the star. Hoffman goes on to explain "Hans Pfaall" in terms of the dialectic between positivistic and intuitive epistemology. Since Pfaall's letter describes to us only the mechanical engineering of his ascent and contains nothing about what he encountered when he arrived at his destination, we assume that a knowledge inexpressible has been conferred, at the threshold between rational and intuitive knowledge. Explains Hoffman, "Hans Pfaall sent back to Rotterdam the account of how he got to the moon, but

not a word of what he found there. His inventive mind got him there –that was his role; a higher intuition takes over once ratiocination has gained ascent into the heavens” (158).

Though Hoffman goes on to suggest that gross inaccuracies in scientific doctrine force one to conclude that the scientific mumbo-jumbo is, at least to some extent, merely a device for rendering the metaphor of secret knowledge, the prominence of positivistic reason suggests that it cannot be dismissed or at least marginalized in this way. The science, in many ways, *is* the special knowledge. In “Al Aaraaf,” Poe fashions a metaphor consistent with the philosophy that would guide the whole of his artistic vision. The angels called upon to awaken and communicate with the inhabitants of the star are Nesace, who represents Beauty, and Ligeia, who represents Harmony. The concept of Harmony we take to mean the rational, interfitting laws of the universe, which we discover and understand by way of positivistic inquiry and describe with the language of science. Through these concepts, Mabbott explains, “the Will of God, or Truth, is imaginatively communicated to us...” (94). Pfaall perceives the Harmony among the rational laws of the universe, and the essence of the ascent metaphor is that literacy of rational order is the beginnings of communion with God; the understanding and exercise of the faculty of reason, because it is the principle permeating cosmic design, raises us to God so that we may commune with Him and receive His Truths in the form of special knowledge. We assume Pfaall has achieved that communion, exercising both his faculties of reason and of intuition, because, acting in the fashion of God, he sends his own messenger back to the unenlightened, expressing in his letter only that which is expressible, and the foolish citizen misperceive even that.

A tale with a similar conceit, “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” has received more critical attention than has “Hans Pfaall.” Regarded as an central piece in the Poe canon, it is

highly atmospheric and employs an important and recurring metaphor in Poe fiction, the great abyssal cataract in the ocean, the symbolism of which Poe leaves agonizingly mysterious. J. Gerald Kennedy refers to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as an “abyss of interpretation” for the appearance of the cataract at the end of the narrative and the story’s strange, sudden ending, which has baffled most critics. “A Descent into the Maelstrom” provides its own interpretive abyss, as there has not appeared a critical consensus regarding the metaphorical descent and ascent of the narrator. Tracy Ware considers the tale central in the analysis of Poe’s use of scientific rhetoric and uses the two prevailing opinions of Poe, that he was either fundamentally serious or fundamentally ironic, as a frame for describing the two main conflicting interpretations of the tale. The orthodox reading, representing a serious Poe, she explains, established by Margaret J. Yonce, is that “the story involves an archetypal descent and reascent and a successful quest for ‘spiritual transcendence’” (Ware 77). The cataract itself represents the power and grandeur of God, and it is incumbent upon the narrator to, in Yonce’s words, “behold in the elements of his approaching destruction beauty and grandeur,” if he would escape destruction and fall under divine favor. The narrator’s wisdom is in making this connection between beauty and destruction, a thematic convergence that permeates Poe’s art and his cosmology. But, making the philosophical link, it is, according to Ware, “up to the fisherman to respond, and he does so when he uses his scientific acuity to escape the maelstrom” (78).

The ratiocinative power of the fisherman is what enables his correct response to the physical and spiritual context, suggesting there is a material quality to the transcendent spiritual experience. Daniel Hoffman locates the function of material knowledge in the spiritual metaphysics by interpreting the fisherman as “the ratiocinative principle incarnate”

(139), which is especially pertinent and accurate when considered next to a telling *Marginalia* entry by Poe. In an entry titled “The Quest of Reason” Poe refers to reason as “man’s chief idiosyncrasy” and takes issue with the assertion of “the theorizers on Government” that Man’s natural state is the savage: Humankind’s “savage condition—his condition of action *without* reason—is his *unnatural* state. The more he reasons, the nearer he approaches the position to which this chief idiosyncrasy irresistibly impels him; and not until he attains this position with exactitude [...] will his *natural* state ultimately be reached” (16:6). Since we are all diffused portions of a single irrelative particle, and since we are destined to return to that state, the natural state to which Poe refers must be the state of absolute unity and communion with the Godhead. It is to the rational principle, the fundamental fact of his being, that the fisherman “owes his continued life” and from which he “derives pleasure in the exercise of his nature” (Hoffman 139). And it is the exercise of the human idiosyncrasy that leads the fisherman to communion with the Godhead, which is represented by the rainbow appearing at the end of the tale, interpreted by Finholt, Ketterer, and Egan as a symbol and promise of divine favor (Ware 78).

The objection to this interpretation is that the validity of the scientific principles is sometimes dubious and the representation of science in the story sometimes seems to suggest that the products of ratiocinative exercise are unreliable. Ware argues that the broken watch of the fishermen is “an apt symbol of the unreliability of technology” (78). To this objection, however, we must respond that part of the ingenuity of Hans Pfaall was his ability to improvise when faced with unforeseen failures in technology. Technology is a product of the exercise of reason but it is not the abstract principle itself, which necessarily is perfectly constituted, and it is not the flawless application of reason. Rationality, like any other

principle, can be misapplied, but that is not the failure of the principle, it is the failure of the one who would misunderstand or misapply it. The narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” for example, is under the impression that his rational actions demonstrate his sanity, but we know that the rationality of those actions is an illusion because they spring from irrational impulses. The misapplied rationality contributes to his madness and his final perverse act of confessing. Ware also points to the “invariable miscalculation” of the fisherman during the descent, but again, it is the miscalculation of the fisherman, not the insufficiency of rational principle. Finally, the action that initially preserves the life of the fisherman, grabbing onto the ring-bolt as the boat descends, is described as an act of instinct, not of rational thought. We must consider in conjunction with this, however, that it is the stubborn clinging to the ring-bolt that causes the brother to perish.

Though Ware reads these points as “scientific inadequacies,” she goes on to argue that they do not undermine the orthodox interpretation that the episode represents a successful search for spiritual transcendence. This reading, however, either displaces the scientific rhetoric as the thematic focus of the tale, or it changes the locus of the spiritual experience by positing it in a poetic rather than rational context. The narrator, as some argue, is saved by his poetic appreciation of the spiritual connection between beauty and destruction, and thus that the tale is in fact an indictment of ratiocination for its inadequacy in responding to spiritual situations. As a statement about the faculty of reason, this interpretation seems untenable, given the wealth of evidence to the contrary in Poe’s other writings, especially his nonfiction ones, and the fact that the tale was published in April, 1841 at the height of Poe’s interest in and experimentation with rational principles. It was published in the same month as “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and came only a few

months before Poe's essay on cryptography, "A Few Words on Secret Writing." Probably it is best to consider the philosophic principles on the terms that Poe establishes, as there seems scant evidence to suggest that the principles are treated with irony.

The alternate interpretation is that the "exciting knowledge" toward which the fisherman suggests he is being impelled lies on the other side of the abyss, and that to fight against that force is a perverse desire to avoid communion with God. The argument is that the spiritual quest is in fact unsuccessful because the narrator does not allow himself to be swept through the bottom of the cataract where the knowledge will be conferred. The matter for interpretation is whether the narrator does in fact reach the bottom of the cataract, in which case the reascent represents a rebirth, engineered by the narrator's ratiocinative literacy of his material/spiritual context. Certainly the story's purpose is partly to evaluate the ratiocinative principle in some way, meaning its presence in the story is not peripheral to the theme of spiritual enlightenment. To advocate scientific precepts as Poe does here, however, does not imply that he does so to the exclusion of other principles, namely the principle of intuition, powered by the imaginative and poetic qualities of the mind. The narrator clearly demonstrates both in the tale, and it is that potent combination that consistently informs Poe's philosophy regarding the ratiocinative principle. Indeed, the recognition of the spiritual dynamic between harmony and destruction, as Sweeny suggests, calls for the poetic insight that the fisherman demonstrates as he is propelled downward into the abyss:

It may look like boasting—but what I tell you is truth—I began to reflect how magnificent a thing it was to die in such a manner, and how foolish it was in me to think of so paltry a consideration as my own individual life, in view of so wonderful a manifestation of God's power. (1: 240)

The poetic insight established, the response of the fisherman must correspond to the dual nature of the Maelstrom; his rebirth materially and spiritually will be engineered only

through his combination of philosophical and scientific insight. The dialectic for spiritual insight is made specifically to parallel the dual material and spiritual quality of the cataract itself and, ultimately, of cosmic figuration at large.

Poe makes no mystery of the existence of the maelstrom itself. Using a device previously employed in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Poe quotes scientific texts directly in the narrative, in this case to explain the periodic appearance of the vortex. The narrator quotes the scientific description given in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: the vortices “have no other cause than the collision of waves rising and falling, at flux and reflux, against a ridge of rocks and shelves, which confines the water so that it precipitates itself like a cataract” (1: 232). The appearance of the whirlpool is no mysterious thing; it has a rational explanation that is consistent with the harmony of physical laws and it is itself, as the fisherman perceives, an example of the divine grandeur of God. The mystery of it is what lies beyond it, because to find out the fisherman must die.

The fisherman indeed does reach the bottom of the vortex and is figuratively born anew approximating and acting according to the dialectic demonstrated in the constitution of the maelstrom. The ascent metaphor operates differently here than in “Hans Pfaall,” but it is still, considering Poe’s word choice in titling the story, the central thematic symbol. The fisherman’s scientific reasoning involves fashioning some method for ascent, as did Pfaall’s reasoning. As he clung to the ring-bolt on the ship, he “muttered a hurried prayer to God, and thought all was over,” but maintaining his calm, he observed that the larger, bulkier objects were sinking faster than the lighter objects (1: 242). He also noted that spherical and cylindrical objects sank more slowly than those shaped otherwise because they offered more resistance to the suction of the maelstrom. This scientific principle seems to be an invention

on the part of Poe, but that does not undermine the metaphoric conduct of the ascent. Unlike his brother, the fisherman is able to maintain a level head, and with calm rationality observes the mechanical processes of the whirlpool. He casts himself off the bulky remains of the ship and attaches himself to a small cylindrical cask. Poe, punning on the word “casket,” suggests that the ascent is a rebirth, with the fisherman symbolically experiencing death and rebirth. When the fisherman, however, makes his spiritual insight regarding the unity of beauty and destruction, the death concept is transfigured so that, while it was before the reciprocal quality of life, it has now become unified with that concept, and is indistinguishable from it. Like beauty and destruction, life and death have become one and the same. As the hypnotized patient in “Mesmeric Revelation” observes, “There are two bodies—the rudimental and the complete, corresponding with the two conditions of the worm and the butterfly. What we call ‘death’ is but the painful metamorphosis” (93). Both directions in the maelstrom are now the same; a descent into the maelstrom is now an ascent from it, and the dyadic framework for cosmological figuration is reinforced. The beauty and destruction of the maelstrom are one just as the cataclysmic heat death of the universe that Poe predicts in *Eureka* represents the final unification of all matter into the one, perfect primordial particle. The conclusion is that, like Pfaall, the fisherman has found a way concurrently to exist and not exist while his frantic brother is borne only into oblivion.

The theme of rebirth is given a more explicit treatment in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” a tale that can serve to illuminate the nature of the transition occurring in the rebirth event and which can be applied to the fisherman’s experience with the Maelstrom. Monos and Una are an angelic pair who were lovers on Earth before their death; they are now reunited after death and the pith of the tale is Monos’ account of his sensory and

spiritual experiences during his death and rebirth. The two characters have been reborn into their angelic states and, as their names suggest—both representing lexical roots of “one,”—they have been symbolically subsumed into a cosmic unity—a paradise “for man the Death-purged—for man to whose now exalted intellect there should be poison in knowledge no more—for the redeemed, regenerated, blissful, and now immortal, but still for the *material*, man” (3: 205). The two figures discourse on humankind’s pursuit of knowledge, indicating that it is the devotion to either extreme, abstractions and generalities or “harsh mathematical reason,” that results in the destruction of the Earth. The ideal pursuit of knowledge is one that merges the spiritual with the material, and Monos cites Plato’s vision of education, “gymnastics for the body, and *music* for the soul,” as the ideal model for pursuing knowledge (3: 204). The goal of unity between the material and the spiritual is achieved by the fisherman, whose spiritual cognition of the link between beauty and destruction is followed by his material response to the situation, and, reborn, he, like Pfaall, who simultaneously exists and does not exist, represents the unification of the antinomic essences.

The theme of rebirth is one that appears often in Poe’s fiction and symbolizes the transmigration of the soul as it acquires knowledge, material and spiritual, and moves from a state that might be called antethanopsis, characterized by inconceivable diversity, to a state of rebirth into divine unity, paralleled macrocosmically in the rhythmic expansion/collapse of the universe. The theme of rebirth as a process of unification was quite often embodied metaphorically in a system of tropes that Poe found ready-made in the pseudoscientific practice of alchemy, the science of the transmutation of base metals into silver or gold. As Randall Clack observes, “throughout his work, Poe demonstrates his concern with the spiritual renewal that occurs after death and a philosophy that postulates a unity of the

material and spiritual realms, often expressed through alchemical analogies and imagery” (367). The processes of alchemical conversion represent, according to Clack, “tropes of spiritual rebirth.” Alchemy is a physical process that also has a mystical or philosophical component that parallels the material transmutation of the base metals. As material, or exoteric, alchemy sought the creation of physical gold, “philosophical alchemy sought to produce spiritual gold through the alchemist’s creative imagination, symbolized by the alchemical fire” (Clack 369). In exoteric alchemy, a new material comes into being, which is reflected in Philosophical alchemy by the development of a new spiritual perception. The process is known as “*solve et coagula*—dissolve and make whole—an alchemical variation of the death and rebirth theme” (Clack 369). The base materials of exoteric alchemy are dissolved and fused into a new substance, which implies the unification of opposites, and is symbolic of the conjunction of spirit and body. Though the rebirth theme is imaged separately in many cases in Poe’s fiction, without the support of the alchemical metaphor, the philosophical implications of the alchemical tropes can help us to understand the value and meaning of Poe’s rebirth theme. The fisherman in “A Descent into the Maelstrom” is subjected to the alchemical fire in the form of the vortex—the *nigredo*, a chaotic blackness, in alchemical terminology—and emerges reborn with a new spiritual insight, but still, like *Monos and Una*, in a material form. Clack describes the final stage of the alchemical process, or *opus*, as the attainment of *Gnosis*, which for the Fisherman is symbolized by the rainbow as divine knowledge and communion with the Godhead.

The alchemical tropes are employed in a number of Poe’s stories, but most overtly in “Von Kempelen and His Discovery,” another tale with a strong hoaxing aspect. The tale purports to be a legitimate journalistic article written by Poe on the recent discovery of an

alchemy laboratory being secretly maintained by Von Kempelen. A raid is conducted by the police on Von Kempelen's room in a house comprising seven stories, which presumably correspond symbolically with the seven noble phases of alchemical transmutation: lead, tin, mercury, iron, copper, silver, and gold. The authorities find in Von Kempelen's room assorted tools that would have been used by the alchemist—beakers, a furnace, chemicals, and other paraphernalia. Searching the room, the police eventually find a chest filled with what they at first presume to be brass, but which turns out to be a remarkably pure gold “without the slightest appreciable alloy!” (5: 253). Burton Pollin interestingly interprets this tale as representing Poe's role as an alchemist producing gold in the form of art. Indeed, we know already that Poe advocated making art approximate cosmic design in order that it would move the reader on an intuitive level; his art constructs represent the unification of the material and spiritual, the logical and intuitive (the combination embodied by detective Dupin) in their design but also in their thematic substance. According to John Hussey, Poe would have the art “calm, strengthen, and renew its audiences by creating an effect or ‘undercurrent’ of cosmic harmony” (37). Poe, then, is Von Kempelen combining the material and spiritual formally and thematically to represent the quality of divine unity.

As for the hoaxing quality of the piece, there is an interesting detail in the story that can illuminate the meaning of Poe's intent to hoax. Poe writes that the Von Kempelen “family is connected, in some way, with Maelzel, of Automaton-chess-player memory.” Then, posing as the journal's editor briefly, he includes this: “[If we are not mistaken, the name of the *inventor* of the chess-player was either Kempelen, Von Kempelen, or something like it. –Ed.]” (5: 249). Poe demonstrated to us in his tale/essay “Maelzel's Chess Player” that he perceives hoaxes such as the chess player as an encoded text to be read by those with

the analytical ability to decipher them. As Poe systematically, through rational analysis, exposed the hoax of the automaton chess player, so readers are *expected* to decode the text of Poe's hoax pieces. Of course, the hoax is perpetrated by Poe, not by Von Kemepelen; the gold he produced indeed was real in the story, having been chemically tested. The gold, therefore is symbolically viable; it represents the product of the artist.

III. Pym and Poe: Maintaining Reason in a Dangerous World

Clack examines a number of Poe's stories, elucidating the use of the alchemy metaphor in them, but does not address Poe's lengthiest work *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which Poe may have conceived in alchemical terms. The story is Poe's only one of novel length and is only infrequently grouped with his science fiction efforts, but it is a work whose themes are intimately connected to issues of science. Unlike most of the other science fiction works, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* has garnered an unusually large amount of critical attention.¹² There are myriad diverse interpretations of the story as well as assessments of its quality. Suffice it to say that *Pym* represents somewhat of a microcosm of Poe's work as a whole, a quality that assumes special significance given the self-referential nature of the title—the rhythmic similarity of the titular main character's name to that of the author and the phonetic similarity between "Arthur" and "author." Estimations of the work's value range from extremely high praise to dismissive characterizations of it as a piece of hack-work. A relatively common reading of the novel, however, focuses on its prominent

¹² A number of critics, including J. Gerald Kennedy, Grace Ferrell, Frederick Frank, Douglas Robinson, and David Ketterer, have offered surveys of *Pym* criticism that are extremely helpful in organizing the many diverse readings of the novel.

theme of rebirth. In her bibliography of *Pym* criticism, Grace Farrell cites Walter Bezanson, who in 1960 “established in detail the recurring pattern of deaths and rebirths in *Pym*” (221). Two years later Charles O’Donnell “noted that Pym’s voyage runs a suggestive nine months and that ‘his ultimate symbolic birth into knowledge of the eternal is preceded by many symbolic deaths and rebirths’” (221). Further, Paul J. Eakin viewed *Pym* as “one in a series of Lazarus stories in which Poe was in pursuit of ultimate knowledge, beyond the death experience” (222). The climax of the narrative Daniel Hoffman interprets as Poe entering “the womb of the world itself, from which he was born and is reborn” (272). Several critics have maintained that *Pym* is closely related to *Eureka* philosophically, which is an accurate comparison if we read the pattern of persistent death and rebirth as prefiguring Poe’s insight of the eternally recurrent expansion and collapse of the universe. We should understand the meaning of this rebirth in the terms represented by the metaphorical quality of the alchemical processes, whose tropes Poe seemed to identify with and whose culmination represents the acquisition of divine knowledge. Poe symbolizes a series of rebirths in the episodic narrative that is essentially a struggle between the ratiocinative instinct of the narrator to determine meaning and acquire knowledge, and the temptation to misperceive by eschewing rational principles.

Arthur Gordon Pym is, as Hoffman characterizes him, “a ratiocinator, full of learned and interesting disquisitions on seamanship, geology, and language, and he proves to be an observant recorder of the flora, fauna, and primitive customs on the islands of Antarctica...” (261). He is in some measure a variation of C. Auguste Dupin—though certainly a more passive character than the detective—as well as of Poe himself. He is an analyst who struggles with his powers, just as Poe often seemed to struggle in controlling the precise

rationality that guided his artistic principles, a rationality meticulously, and, for Poe, triumphantly delineated in “The Philosophy of Composition.” *Pym*, much like *Eureka*, is a tale about the analogue between cosmic design and artistic creation. We make note again here of the similarity between the name of the protagonist and that of the author. Moreover, the tale has a bit of hoaxing about it as Poe represents himself as only the editor of the text, and hence poses as Pym. Indeed, Mark Canada suggests that “Pym” is a compression of “pseudonym.” In addition, Pym’s grandfather was a lawyer who practiced in “Edgarton”; Augustus, Pym’s close friend, as Kenneth Silverman points out, is two years older than Pym, the same age difference between Poe and his elder brother William Henry Leonard; further, the place where Pym met Augustus was at the academy of Mr. “E. Ronald” which is an anagram for Poe’s brother’s surname; finally, the death of Augustus occurs fittingly on August 1, the same date as the death of Poe’s brother. Silverman also points out that the cryptic cry of the inhabitants of Tsalal, “Tekeli-li,” was part of the title of a play that Poe’s mother, Eliza Poe, had acted in a number of times. We may interpret these autobiographical elements as Poe’s relating Pym’s struggles with reason and unreason to Poe’s own struggle with creating the art he desired to make—no easy task given the criteria he established, that the creation of art was essentially a mathematical exercise rather than a feverish act of inspiration.

It is well known of Poe that his works rarely reached a state of completion; he tinkered with and refined them endlessly, especially the poems. If Poe’s goal was, as Pollin suggests, to produce artistic gold in the fashion of the philosophical alchemist, *Pym* demonstrates his struggle with that role, being guided and impelled by the ratiocinative principle, man’s “chief idiosyncrasy,” according to the marginalia entry, but having that

faculty ever frustrated by external factors and by the imp of the perverse. I argue in chapter two that Poe's detective tales act as allegories of art creation that assign values to the opposing impulses of reason and unreason; Pym is a passive Dupin, impelled by reason but not always able to control it, and the novel is the artist's struggle with that weakness and the concurrent pursuit of knowledge available to one with such powers as Dupin has.

The recurring rebirth theme in *Pym* should be read as an indication of the character's spiritual quest. Whether or not all elements of the story are skillfully controlled, Poe demonstrates unquestionably with a rich use of symbolism and careful formal planning that the novel was envisioned as much more than just a commercial product, and we can reject the surprisingly dismissive opinion some have of the novel that it "lacks a controlling theme and has no incontrovertible serious meaning—symbolic, psychoanalytic, existentialist, racist, or otherwise" (Ridgely and Haverstick 80). A rebirth for Poe represented a leap to a new existence of material and spiritual unity and communion with the Godhead. In the works we understand that metaphor often as an affirmation of the character's insight.

J. Gerald Kennedy has argued that *Pym* is a tale about the impossibility of making accurate perceptions in a chaotic world. He examines a pattern of misperceptions made by the characters—Pym most notably—focusing especially on the scene in which the last few survivors of the *Grampus* mutiny are adrift and spot a ship approaching them. Looking at the ship from a distance, they see what appears to be a crew member waving to them. As the ship approaches, however, they find that the boat is a ghost ship, and that all on board are corpses. Indeed, such misperceptions are common in the tale, as Kennedy suggests, but a number of critics, including Charles Feidelson, Jr., neglect factors external to the ratiocinative principle in judging the success of applying the principle. Particularly, they do not consider the

psychological state of the character, which often limits the ability of the character to reason. The conclusion they draw is that, in Poe's stories, "reason is deliberately put through the mill and emerges in fragments" (Feidelson 35). For example, the Usher house Feidelson interprets as a symbol of rational order, and its fall represents "the destruction of reason." But such a reading seems to condemn the principle itself, ignoring the fact that the symbol's primary referent, the psyche of Roderick Usher, is drug-addled and oppressed by guilt and morbidity; it is a head haunted by ghosts, like the mansion in the symbolic poem included in the text of the tale. Similarly, the obsessive, insane narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" could not be expected to correctly understand the ratiocinative principle, much less correctly apply it. That he perceives his actions as rational indicates that he has lost all sense of what is rational and what is not. Arthur Gordon Pym is likewise afflicted by factors that tax his mental faculties. As John Hussey observes, the degradation of the characters' psyches is brought about "not only by material causes (cholera, swamp gas, fog, opium or whiskey) but, more importantly, by the protagonists' own panic and pride—pride which induces a hideous, life-denying solipsism; panic which disrupts their emotional and mental equilibrium" (38). The narrator of "The Sphinx" misperceives a fly crawling down a window as a hideous beast charging down a distant hillside; according to Hussey this is due to his "palsying fear of cholera" (38). Pym faces such disruptions in the extreme as he tries rationally to construct accurate perceptions; he suffers starvation, injury, fear, exhaustion, sleep deprivation, dehydration; in short, he suffers, in his own words, "every species of calamity and horror" (2: 28). These disruptions to the character, however, do not affect the efficacy of the principle of reason itself.

As Poe demonstrates in "A Descent into the Maelstrom," we have a responsibility to apply reason correctly if we would benefit from it; the fisherman who keeps his wits

survives; the one who makes no attempt to place his situation in a rational context perishes. The struggle of Pym is to maintain his ability to reason amid the physical and emotional distress that tempts him to do otherwise. Poe seemed to understand that the world is fraught with dangers that would affect our ability to reason, and Pym faces those dangers, failing at times to maintain his rationality but quite often surviving or engineering his symbolic rebirth by applying scientific knowledge and rational perception. *Pym*, and humans in the world at large, experience a tension between, as Charles O'Donnell says, "the fear of annihilation and the longing for unification" (46). The novel then is in part, in Edward H. Davidson's words, a "symbolic enactment of man's search for logic and meaning"—a journey into "a philosophy of knowledge" (qtd. by Kaplan 148).

The symbolic rebirths in *Pym* are easy to identify. They invariably involve some sort of entombment and rescue as well as some textual proximity to issues of rationality. In an episode that serves as a prelude to Pym's main adventure, he and his companion Augustus go for a nighttime sail aboard the latter's small boat, the *Ariel*. It eventually becomes clear to Pym that Augustus is drunk and unable to manage the vessel, and Pym, who knows little about seamanship, cannot return them to shore. They soon find a large whaling vessel, the *Penguin*, bearing down on them, and, as the only one of the two retaining his senses, Pym secures his friend to the deck by tying a rope around Augustus and fastening it to a ring bolt, the same act that preserved the life of the fisherman in "A Descent into the Maelstrom." The two vessels collide, and Pym is swept underneath the *Penguin* and held to the hull by a shaft of wood that pierces his neck. He and Augustus are rescued by the crew of the *Penguin* and Pym is raised in rebirth from the symbolic grave of the water.

In perhaps the most archetypal symbolic rebirth, Pym is stowed away in the *Grampus*, waiting for Augustus, who has a place in the crew, to prepare the rest of the crew for the presence of Pym on board. He stays in a dark recess of the ship, a “womb-like blackness...ready to start his nine-month journey (from June 17 to March 22)” (O’Donnell 40). The only exit is through a passageway that leads to a trap door in Augustus’ cabin. Punning on the word “berth,” Poe has Pym stay in a coffin-like box, four feet high and six feet long, which is equipped with amenities comparable to those of the regular berths of the crew. In the darkness, Pym’s only means of finding the exit is an umbilical string that leads to the trap door. After having grown panicked, fatigued, and dehydrated, he awakes from a troubling dream to find affixed to his dog’s collar a message sent to him by Augustus, and he must struggle to regain his sense of reason enough to formulate a plan for reading the note in the dark. Employing his scientific knowledge, he rubs pieces of phosphorous on the paper, which illuminates it enough that it could be read if there were there any writing on it. No writing is evident, and Pym angrily tears up the paper, realizing suddenly that he had examined only one side of the paper. He reconstructs the paper and repeats the use of phosphorous on the other side. The message on the paper, though cryptic, warns him not to try to escape the hold, which he had been considering previously. Soon after this episode, Augustus returns to retrieve Pym and Pym emerges from his womb-like berth, reborn symbolically into the light of the outside. Such is the pattern of rebirth in the novel; Pym always manages to survive, and that survival is thematically linked to his ability to maintain reason during severe circumstances. The determination of whether he is ultimately successful in his quest for logic and meaning occurs in the book’s final scene, which represents the symbolic end of an old life and passage into a new one.

The cryptic conclusion of the novel, in which Pym, his companion Peters, and their prisoner, Nu-Nu, are adrift on the sea and suddenly encounter a colossal figure shrouded in white upon the water, may be the moment of judgment for Pym as he has sought through the trials of unreason to find logic and knowledge. The narrative ends with no further comment on what happens after the characters encounter the figure, and thus it is left to us to determine if Pym has been successful like the reborn Norse fisherman in “A Descent into the Maelstrom” or if his journey was ultimately a submission to the imp of unreason, resulting in his destruction as with the perished brother of the fisherman. Of course, the frame of the story suggests that Pym’s destiny is the same as that of the reborn fisherman; Pym survives to write the narrative, after all. The shrouded white figure seems to issue from a cataract that opens in the ocean, which suggests that the symbolic value of Pym’s experience is the same as that of the two sailors caught in the Maelstrom. That the prisoner “Nu-Nu” has expired when they approach the cataract and left only Pym and Peters to face the vortex suggests further that these two characters are in a reenactment of the Maelstrom experience, which also involved two characters. If Pym is facing judgment at the end of the narrative, we should understand there to be only two possibilities, destruction or rebirth, the latter of which has been symbolically prefigured in Pym’s early rise from his watery grave, his escape from the coffin-like box in the *Grampus*’ hold, and his emerging from the tomb of rubble on the island of Tsalal.

As Kennedy has observed, the color symbolism of the final sections lends itself to an unusually large number of interpretations, but Poe may be coordinating the rebirth theme with his color symbolism here through alchemical metaphors. Black, white, and red have specific symbolic value in exoteric alchemy; as Randall Clack describes the process, the base

metal “was subjected to extreme heat while treated with chemical compounds until it crumbled into black powder. From this stage further chemical operations were performed on the substance as it changed in color from black to white and finally to red (gold)” (369). Pym and the crew of the *Jane Guy* arrive on the island of Tsalal, which means “darkness,” and find that the entire island is black in color, including the savage inhabitants. After surviving the massacre of the *Jane Guy*’s crew, Pym and Peters escape the island on a small boat and drift southward, where the water gradually turns milky white, and, of course, they finally encounter the shrouded figure who is the “perfect whiteness of snow” (Poe 2: 242).

Moreover, Pym notices that the waters are undergoing visible change and that they are growing progressively hotter, which perhaps represents the presence of the alchemical fire. Because we never reach the color red, last in the alchemical process, the conversion is left incomplete, just as the narrative is left incomplete. Poe does supply us with images of red, however, in the claws and teeth of the white bear and in other places, which establishes the alchemical color schema, though it does not seem to follow the progression from black to white to red.

It seems unlikely that Poe would have used these colors, highly symbolic for him, as part of a racial allegory, as many have suggested. With the rebirth theme so prominent, the novel seems to rely on the well-established alchemical tropes for the expression of that theme. It is possible, then, that the colors, though perhaps too mechanically and abruptly employed, represent the stages of alchemical conversion as Pym travels closer to his symbolic death and rebirth. As for the shrouded white figure, Scott Peeples observes that “critics who find unity, coherence, and meaning in Pym [...] tend to regard [it] as an archetypal figure,” while the deconstructionists interpret it as a symbol of the blank page and

the ultimate nothingness that awaits those searching for logic and knowledge. Richard Kopley views it as a symbol of Christ, and Richard Wilbur cites suggestive passages from the book of Daniel and of Revelation to which Poe may have been referring in describing the figure: “[The figure represents] Anthropos, or the Primal Man, or the snow white ancient of Days (Daniel 7:9), or the ‘one like unto the son of man’ in Revelation 1:13, whose ‘head and...hairs were white like wool, as white as snow.’ In other words, the figure stands for the coming reunion of the voyager’s soul with God and—what is the same thing—with the divinity in himself.” This reunion, accomplished by Pym, is of the sort achieved also by the fisherman during his encounter with the great cataract.

The form of the novel may also provide clues about its thematic intent. The amount of planning that went into *Pym* has been a subject of extensive debate. Having been envisioned first as a serialized novel but then published as a book after only a portion of it appeared in serial form, it was composed at irregular intervals. Ridgely and Haverstick contend that Poe took a ramshackle approach to composing the work, which accounts for what they see as its lack of a controlling theme or serious meaning. Alexander Hammond and Richard Kopley, on the other hand, find *Pym* to be a carefully planned book, which is borne out by its highly ordered structuring. Harry Levin, among others, has noted the symmetry in the story’s design. The book runs twenty-six chapters, divided fairly cleanly into two sections of thirteen chapters each. The first thirteen chapters deal with Pym’s adventures aboard the *Grampus* and the second thirteen tell of his adventures aboard the *Jane Guy*, the ship that rescues Pym and Peters from the remains of the *Grampus*. Additionally, the first chapter recounts Pym’s episode on a smaller boat, the *Ariel* before he moves to the whaling vessel *Grampus*. This change is reflected symmetrically in the final chapter when Pym and Peters must abandon the

Jane Guy after it is destroyed and travel by canoe. Charles O'Donnell, indeed, has found that each significant event in the first thirteen chapters corresponds with some event in the second thirteen:

At the beginning, the characters set sail in a small boat; there is a wreck from which they are rescued; Pym is confined in the hold; there is treachery in the form of a mutiny; they escape by killing treacherous men; and they sail in a disabled ship toward the equator and are rescued. In the second half they sail away from the equator toward an island; there is treachery; they are confined in the hills; they escape by killing treacherous men; they set sail in a small boat toward the pole; [...] The general impression of parallel events is reinforced by other similar details in the two halves (some of them seemingly without other purpose than to call our attention to the order in the book): On July 5 (summer north of the equator) a man falls overboard from the *Grampus*; In January 10 (summer south of the equator) a man falls overboard from the *Jane Guy*. On the *Grampus*, Pym looks into a mirror and almost swoons—so with Too-wit on the *Jane Guy*.

Such an ordered, symmetrical structure would seem to be at odds with any interpretation that the text represents the futility of making rational perceptions or judgments in a chaotic world where meaning is unavailable or nonexistent. The text, in fact, reflects the same principle that Poe insists is necessary for producing a well-wrought and affecting work of art: art must be carefully and methodically considered on a basis largely mathematical so that it embodies the reciprocally dependent nature of all elements in the universe according to the macrocosmic primordial impulse of all matter and spirit. As an artist, Poe seeks unity in the work, and hence, unification with the Godhead, much as Pym seeks unification through communion with the white shrouded figure, who represents the apotheosis of unity. Again, the trials of Pym in seeking reason and unity parallel the struggle of Poe to control his artistic powers according to rational method as the artist must do in order to create a work that approximates the “plots of God.”

The novel also employs the technique of including large passages of technical information, which, in the case of *Pym* is often quoted directly from source material. This

technique, used also in “Hans Pfaall” and “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” and later by Melville in the novel many have found to have been directly inspired by *Pym*, is an aspect of the verisimilar style, and reflects to some degree a confidence in empirically gained data. Pym’s use of such material reflects, as Hoffman points out, his ratiocinative and scientific nature. It is a nature Arthur shares with author, as well as with the analyst detective Auguste Dupin. *Pym*, like “Pfaall,” “Von Kempelen,” and “Mesmeric Revelation” has hoaxing qualities, but that is, as Burton Pollin observes, the by-product of the verisimilar style and the science fiction genre at large, which necessarily engenders an unwilling suspension of disbelief in making the fantastic possibilities of science plausible to the reader. Further, if we interpret the hoax quality as an occasional product of the exigencies of art-creation (for we cannot interpret it as a statement on the elusiveness of meaning given Poe’s treatment of the hoax of Maelzel’s chess player), that is, if the hoax *is* the link between artistic design and cosmic design, the work disclaims its status as a hoax; it ultimately is an allegory of the creation of art, like the Dupin tales, as I argue in the next chapter.

Dennis Porter writes that any interpretation of literature is “an act of looking and overlooking” (502). Such a sentiment is inarguable because there is always information to contradict our interpretations, but while overlooking is expected and necessary, the deconstructionist and poststructuralist interpretations of Poe’s scientific works stretch our ability to overlook past its limits. Any single plausible interpretation of the scientific pieces as ironic (and there are plenty) requires overlooking a voluminous amount of Poe’s other writings in the form of essays, *Marginalia*, fugitive writings, and other evidence that maintains in earnest that rationality, the idiosyncrasy of humankind, is a vital component in perceiving stable meanings reflected in cosmic design. It is, in the case of Poe, especially

problematic to interpret any single tale out of the context of the larger, consistent oeuvre. The remarkable ingenuity of some postmodern critics calls for an amount of overlooking that, as Poe would say, is in the ratio of the amount of ingenuity employed.

Chapter 2

Detectives and Designs: A New Genre for New Purposes

If science fiction was a genre adumbrated by Poe, the detective fiction genre arrived fully formed on Poe's page, which may help to explain why it has not often reached the high standards he set for it. The first and third Dupin stories are remarkably clever, finely wrought pieces of craft that are as close to philosophical statements as any other of Poe's fictional works. The middle story, "The Mystery of Marie Roget," which will not be discussed in detail here, is a lengthy, ponderous piece that suffers from having no real narrative or triumphant denouement. Critics generally agree that "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" are the best of the three tales and are indeed far beyond the quality of "Marie Roget." If it is difficult to determine Poe's role in the development of science fiction, he did indeed invent the modern detective story; of this we are sure. But as much as Poe was fond of creating a thing for the sake of the thing itself, close analysis of the tales reveals that the genre that Poe invented was much more complex than what is now typical of detective fiction. That is, as Eric Carlson observes, "unlike most detective fiction, Poe's tales are not exhausted by a single reading to learn 'whodunit'" (*Companion* 239). The dazzling and ingenious observations of the detective heroes, though the premier feature of detective fiction, are for Poe a ploy, in large part, that readers must be clever enough to look beyond if they would excavate the more profound purposes of such a formally idiosyncratic genre. The detective tales, the most overt valorization of rationality in Poe's fiction, are not statements made through plot, nor are they demonstrations of rational acumen, made by either Poe or Dupin, through plot; the plot serves as a support analogue to the more important consideration of formal technique. The true demonstration of calculated, rational precision is made not by Dupin in solving the mystery, nor by Poe in devising it, but is instead in the considerably more complex creation of a work of literature that is a mystery unto itself and

that invites readers to act in the fashion of their analogue Dupin to analyze the rich tapestry of associations and allusions and discover the philosophical relationship between rationality and the divine.

Lest his readers succumb to the dazzling surface of this experimental fiction, Poe provides, in the first pages of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” a codex for the more astute readers as a guide for interpreting the tale. As he did in a number of stories, Poe lays a theoretical foundation in the form of an essay prefatory to the narrative that serves as a philosophical rationale for the peculiarity that follows. It was used to grandest effect in “The Imp of the Perverse” for describing the impulse of perversity, a phenomenon that interested Poe throughout his career. While that tale describes the baser temptation of humankind, the essay in the detective tale describes contrariwise the august faculty of reason, which Poe calls, in the *Marginalia* entry, “Man’s chief idiosyncrasy” and which impels Man ever to his most natural state. The essay, expounded by the narrator at the beginning of “Rue Morgue,” defines the nature of true analytical power. Poe uses analysis of three games, chess, draughts, and whist, to aid him in distinguishing true analytical power from lesser qualities such as ingenuity. Chess, Poe maintains, is an elaborate frivolity whose air of profundity is a product of its misleading complexity. “What is only complex,” he concludes, “is mistaken (a not unusual error) for what is profound” (3: 147). As a metanarrative admonition not to be deceived by the trivialities of the plot, the preface here warns that the labyrinthine machinations of the mystery itself are a mere frivolity; Dupin and his calculations are deliberately complex, but they are only made so to establish the analogue between detective/criminal and author/reader, both sets of binaries of which call upon the agents of them to engage their sense of reason either to encode or decode the information laid for them.

The complexity of the analogue is considerable, at the very start of the story, before the game proper is afoot. The essay describes the relationship between players of a game, the two players of a chess match (or draughts or whist), as a means to invite the reader to enter into a similar relationship with Poe. The preface's analogue, in short, invites the reader to play detective to Poe, who acts as the encoder of information. The complexity of the plot, then, is a ruse, and the question is whether the reader will perceive Poe's game as a match of chess or of draughts. The reader is not called upon to solve Dupin's mystery, but rather Poe's allegorically encoded text, which is rich in allusions and wordplay. Poe himself recognized that the analyses of Dupin himself were deceptive and admitted that the public thought the tales were "more ingenious than they are – on account of their method and *air* of method" (*Letters* 328). He continues: "In 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', for instance, where is the ingenuity of unraveling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unraveling? The reader is made to confound the ingenuity of the supposititious Dupin with that of the writer of the story" (328). This is the misperception engendered by the tale's frivolous complexities. Poe correctly identifies the mystery not as being in the plot fashioned for Dupin, but in the puzzle wrought in the tale's formal elements. The web he devises, as he recognizes, is the frivolous complexity, akin to that of chess, that causes the less acute reader to perceive the plot mystery as the profound element of the tale. As Eric Carlson observes, "the narrative method [...] allowed Poe exploration of such pressing issues to him as the province of reason, the human longing toward transcendental unity, the structure of language and its relation to consciousness, and the adversarial relations between self and others" (239). This is the profundity that lies beyond the tales' surface features.

According to Peter Thoms, author of *Detection and Its Designs: Narrative and Power in Nineteenth Century Detective Fiction*, the common interpretation of the primary function of detective fiction is that it provides answers to the existential question “how did I get where I am?” The detective assuages the anxiety we feel about not knowing the answer to that question by filling a narrative space of anxiety and uncertainty with reasoned answers, which gives us comfort. Applied to Poe’s stories, this interpretation is problematic because it confuses Dupin and Poe, the mistake Poe expects but clearly warns against, explicitly in his correspondences and implicitly in the preface to “Rue Morgue.” Poe indeed does offer the comfort Thoms describes but in a different way. He acts not as the detective, but as the criminal agent of the binary pair, encoding a metanarrative space so that the reader, upon rationally decoding that space, locates himself within a larger cosmology that is symbolized in the text. The detective/criminal dyad clearly serves as metaphor to the more important author/reader pair, but we here associate the author with the criminal. The aesthete author whom we know from Poe’s various writings on the function of art, presuming a philosophy of art for art’s sake, provides the *context*, a narrative space limned in coded literary technique to be decoded by the perspicacious reader who can appreciate artistic design in terms of the same rational principles that govern its construction. Hence, the reader is drawn into a contemplation of the form of the art.

Poe explores this code theme further in “The Gold Bug” when, finding the code of clues left for him by Captain Kidd, the detective narrator must find “the text (the decoded solution to the puzzle) for his context (the pieces of coded information)” (inset mine), as the reader of Poe must do. Code, after all, to provide meaning, calls for the reverse application of the same rational principle that informs its design. The reader must *employ* the same sense of

common rationality that the artist encoder *deployed* in approximating cosmic design. The rationality of cryptography is a concept investigated in “The Gold Bug,” where the metaphor for artistic creation is explored in greater depth. As we already know from *Eureka*, the ideal form of artistic enterprise is one that serves as analogue for cosmic figuration. The universe is a complex of interdependent, predictable, and rational laws through which flows the essence of the divine fundamental principle of unity. We are all diffused portions of the one irrelative particle and therefore have an intrinsic awareness of and affinity for the rational principles that describe our constitution. As Poe avers in his *Marginalia*, since reason is our chief defining feature, to exercise that faculty leads us inexorably to our natural state, and what could our natural state be but our origin and destiny: the unification with the Godhead? This is the connection between reason and divinity in the detective tale of Poe and is the beginning of our understanding of the associations of Dupin with divinity.

A discussion now of the puzzle that is wrought of the tale’s formal elements will lead into a discussion of the more important thematic concerns of the story. In his prefatory essay, Poe posits the narrative interchange between author and reader (framed by the detective/criminal relationship) as a game. The mechanics of the genre serve to establish the analogue between detective/criminal and author/reader, though the content of the plot eventually becomes an allegory of the higher and the baser (read, “good and evil”) characteristics of humankind. Decoded, the text shows Poe, as the criminal other, communicating through what might be called metanarrative context, to which the reader, as Thoms suggest is his task as a detective, adds the text. Poe encodes the text with formal elements, turning it into a puzzle that constitutes this metanarrative context, and it is the job of the detective reader to find the solution to the mystery of linguistic cues.

John T. Irwin accomplishes a fine piece of detective work in “A Clew to a Clue: Locked Rooms and Labyrinths in Poe and Borges,” accepting the challenge to puzzle out the formal complexity of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Irwin identifies the central formal element of the tale to be the word “clue,” which Poe fittingly chose to emphasize as a key to the logic of the genre and to understanding the tale’s construction and the relationship of that construction to the tale’s thematic substance. The wordplay of the text is a feature common to many of Poe’s stories; the narrator informs us in the prefatory essay that “As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles*. He derives pleasure from even the most trivial occupations bringing his talent into play. He is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, hieroglyphics” (3: 146). Stephen Peithman points out that all of these are puzzles specifically involving wordplay. It is an indication of the nature of Poe’s design for encoding the text.

Irwin reads the story as a “locked room” mystery, which employs an archetypal device that recurs often in detective fiction. Before Dupin can determine “whodunit,” he must first unravel the smaller mystery of how the criminal could have escaped the room where the murders were committed when all means of egress are locked from the inside when the authorities arrive. The police assume that the criminal must have escaped through the window, but when they examine the window and attempt unsuccessfully to open it, they find a nail driven into the base frame of it and assume that the nail is what keeps the window locked shut. When Dupin examines the window, he discovers that a spring lock on the upper portion of the window is what keeps the window in place. He then touches the nail, whereupon the head of it falls to the floor with the shank remaining in the wood; the nail had

deteriorated and broken sometime earlier, but the head remained lodged in the wood. The nail serves as an important symbol in the story around which are built both the formal logic and the thematic substance. Irwin investigates this construct by connecting the plot symbol to the main textual cue, or clue. Dupin, describing his method to the unnamed narrator, says as he discovers the broken nail, “here, at this point, terminated the clew” (3: 175).

Irwin argues convincingly that Poe deliberately uses the archaic spelling, “clew,” to invoke the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, which serves as the archetypal frame for the locked room dilemma in detective fiction. Theseus fastens a string, or clew, outside the labyrinth and threads it through the maze with him as he ventures inside to face the Minotaur so that he may find his way out again. “Clew” then, according to the OED, is the word for a piece of string or thread that guides one through a maze, with a secondary definition describing it as something that leads to the solution of a mystery, which is the primary definition of “clue.” So, Poe exploits the similarity between Theseus escaping from the labyrinth and the criminal escaping from the locked room, making the broken nail represent the element, the clew, that allows the criminal to escape, and the element, the clue, that will lead Dupin to the solution to the mystery of the murder. The remarkably clever wordplay here and use of the nail is further reinforced by the French translation of the word “nail,” which is “clou.” The particular formal device is even more fitting, considering that this story established the conventions of detective fiction and the clue is the primary instrument for, as Thoms would suggest, filling the narrative space preceding the question “how did I get here?” and ultimately providing meaning as a signifier. As Irwin suggest, this pattern of linguistic associations marks “a crucial moment in the development of the battle of wits between writer and reader in the analytic detective genre” (147). While the challenge for the

reader of modern detective fiction is generally to solve the same mystery that the fictional detective is engaged in solving, Poe's reader must decipher the metatextual code of the tale's formal elements.

The formal unity extends farther, however. Poe parallels the homonymic quality of the "clou" with the manifold associations of "head." Dupin describes the scene: "There are two windows in the chamber. One of them is unobstructed by furniture, and is wholly visible. The lower portion of the other is hidden from view by the head of the unwieldy bedstead which is thrust close up against it" (3:173). Both windows have a nail embedded in the frame and a spring lock holding the windows shut. The window whose frame has the nail with the broken head, which is "firm in its bed" (3:173) in the wood, is the one obstructed by the head of the bedstead. Too, when examined, the head of the broken nail falls off; when the body of Mme. L'Espanaye is examined, the neck has been almost completely severed so that the head falls off when the body is lifted up. As Irwin says, "Poe is playing a game of verbal clues," (149) and a game is precisely what he proposed in the preface to the story. The verbal gamesmanship, however, leads into the thematic substance of the story, which Irwin identifies as an exploration of the head/body dichotomy and which is supported thematically by the association of the tale with the myth of Theseus, the Minotaur representing the dichotomy for its animal head and human body. Poe locates his commentary on human reason within this dichotomy.

The head, as it does traditionally, represents reason, while the body represents unreason, a concept equally fascinating to Poe in the form of what he called "perversity," which comprises the impulses that tempt us away from our better and more natural state. The animal quality of the Minotaur's head is, according to Irwin, meant as a clue, or clew, to the

reader about the nature of the murderer in the story. In addition to invoking the Theseus myth as a clue to the identity of the criminal, Dupin uses language suggestive of game hunting in the course of the investigation, which suggests that he is pursuing an animal: “To use a sporting phrase, I had not once been ‘at fault.’ The scent had never for an instant been lost” (3:175). It was a startling device, and according to some, a device unfair to the reader,¹³ to make the murderer an Ourang-Outang, but it is the perfect choice to serve the symbolic structure of the tale and to support its thematic unity.

The characterization of reason and unreason is of course bound up in the characters Dupin and the Ourang-Outang, but its symbolic substance is established through the frame of the head/body dichotomy that Poe is working in the tale’s formal elements. The imagery of the head/body, and the separation of the head from the body is consistently associated with the animal; the motiveless murder of Mme. L’Espanaye, which results in her decapitation, is the work of the animal as it is an action without reason; the nail, which has lost its head, represents the means of the animal’s escape. The action without reason, demonstrated most tellingly by the Ourang-Outang’s mimicry of its master in attempting to shave, is fit within the symbolic dyadic framework established with the imagery of the head/body opposition. After the mystery has been solved, the narrator explains to us the details of the Ourang-Outang’s escape from its master, a sailor. The animal had been confined to a closet, but the sailor, returning home, found that it had escaped that enclosure:

Razor in hand, and fully lathered, it was sitting before a looking-glass, attempting the operation of shaving, in which it had no doubt previously watched its master through the keyhole of the closet. Terrified at the sight of so dangerous a weapon in the possession of an animal so ferocious, and so well able to use it. (3:188)

¹³ It seems to be a matter of etiquette in the detective fiction genre that the author provide enough information that the reader should be reasonably able to solve the mystery before the solution is revealed by the detective. Making the criminal non-human may be considered a violation of that etiquette.

The sailor grabs a whip to subdue the Ourang-Outang, but it escapes down the stairs and through a window into the street. The symbolic substance of this scene is activated by the story's dichotomous frame; the "operation" of shaving, a rational act in its proper context but an act of unreason when the motive is mere mimicry, is located about the head of the animal, further reinforcing the association with the beastly Minotaur, who is designated a beast for its inhuman head. Shaving is rational when administered according to its purpose; associating the act with the head/reason portion of the symbolic frame suggests that the basest and most dangerous form of unreason is reason misapplied, either because of perverseness or because of a lack of understanding of the context of the action. The beast of unreason, transforms the razor from a tool into a dangerous weapon and is, indeed, "so well able" to use it. The Ourang-Outang represents the abstract concept of *unreason*, which afflicts a number of Poe's doomed narrators. While still rational creatures, the narrators demonstrate aspects of unreason, which is a characteristic of the mental degradation they are suffering and which accounts for why they are so terrifying. The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart," whom we never once suspect to be sane, acts in ways that, were they not in the established context, would seem to be rational, but they spring from an irrational impulse. The narrator himself seems puzzled about why he would harbor such ill feelings toward the old man. The murder, like that of Mme. L'Esplanaye, is largely motiveless but for the irrational obsession with the eye, which the narrator incorrectly perceives as an evil, threatening entity. "Object there was none," he freely admits. His assessment of the precautions he took to dispose of the body as "wise" results from the faulty understanding of the context of those actions; they are products of an irrational impulse. The perception of the eye as evil cannot be a rational assessment given the information available; the murder then is an act of unreason, as indeed is any

motiveless crime, so the accessory actions cannot be considered part of a rational design. The faulty reasoning extends to the narrator's estimation of his own sanity, which is a *non sequitur*, based on the evidence. The narrator misapplies the ratiocinative principle, which transforms his actions, as the purpose of the razor was transformed. The Ourang-Outang's attempt to shave is a mimicry of the sailor's shaving, and is therefore also a misapplication of the ratiocinative principle. The context determines the quality of the action.

The rich communication between formal technique and thematic substance is a quality that Poe's fiction demonstrates in abundance. The thematic substance was more often self-referential than didactic, which indicates that taking Poe at his word regarding aesthetics is not naïve, and that perceiving him as an ironic writer because we cannot otherwise fit him into current theory is a misrepresentation of the pattern of philosophy evident in his works. Many re-presentations of the tales, such as those of J. Gerald Kennedy, make plausible arguments that Poe was highly skeptical of the possibility of stable meaning, but each new such interpretation cuts against a wealth of consistent evidence to the contrary, and the approach may be largely responsible for what many perceive as Poe's scattershot and unfocused output. Contrariwise, interpreting the tales on Poe's own terms, taking those terms, as we should, more seriously than we have done, reveals a highly consistent, well-organized pattern of theme and form in the works. The thematic substance, it cannot be denied, indeed is often a commentary on the act of writing, or of art production, from which derives its self-referential quality, but that quality is a manifestation of the abstract reasoning of pieces like "The Poetic Principle," "The Philosophy of Composition," and "The Rationale of Verse." In the latter piece Poe posits, in his most protracted commentary on the subject, that "one-tenth of [literature], possibly, may be called ethical; nine-tenths, however,

appertain to the mathematics; and the whole is included within the limits of the commonest common sense” (14:209).

The faculty of reason, which Poe argues time and again unveils to us the immaculate symmetry and equality of physical laws, serves also as our tool for reflecting that design in our art. Valery was inspired by that cosmography and its implications for the interface between science and art and was the first to comment on the close relationship between Poe’s concept of the universe and Einstein’s. As Lois Davis Vines observes, “In Poe’s discussion of the symmetrical and reciprocal relationship of matter, time, space, gravity, and light, Valery recognized a similarity with the formal symmetry of Einstein’s universe” (9). The self-referential or metatextual quality of many of the tales, then, exists *as* the thematic content, which is that the tales serve as allegories and demonstrations of the mathematical consideration of form. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” is a demonstration of formal and thematic communication, which, like matter and spirit in the Poe cosmology, like God and Man in their communion, must be considered as one. The symbolic frame of the tale, which establishes Dupin as our figure of the ideal convergence of reason and imagination and the Ourang-Outang as our figure without reason, further allegorizes those figures as concepts occupying a specific place in a cosmological structure.

In light of Poe’s leaving us linguistic clews, and *clous*, as part of his formal puzzle, C. Auguste Dupin’s name, of which not many satisfactory interpretations have been advanced, bears some considerations. Poe sets his detective in Paris probably for verbal associations he can draw out of French translation, which is especially evident in his use of the *clou* as a central formal symbol. *Dupin* has a phonetic similarity to *du pain*, which translates to “bread,” or, with a foregoing subject, “of the bread,” an image whose symbolism is activated

by the initial and first name. “Auguste” in this case we may take to mean “kingly” or “exalted.” The “C.” which presumably also suggests “chevalier,” a nobly born French knight, it would not be too much of an interpretive liberty, considering the highly suggestive surname, to say represents the completion of Dupin’s deciphered title: Christ, kingly one, of the bread. The irony of a humble carpenter being born king of kings is shared by Dupin who, characterized as “august” by Poe, lives in poverty, able to attain only those things necessary for survival. The symbolic act of the sacrament, suggested by the translation of the surname, reinforces the concept of communion witnessed in “A Descent into the Maelstrom” and described in Poe’s vision of the destiny of the universe—a theocracy made possible through material interface with God.

Poe’s philosophy, as many have noted, has strains of thought similar to those of Emerson, the most important of which must be the sweeping pantheism of both authors. Poe must have considered Jesus of Nazareth in a way similar to that of the transcendentalists for his representation of the communion between what is God and what is Man; Jesus represented the warp and weft of cosmological totality, the material and the spiritual. Of course, interpreting Dupin as a God-like figure is not new. Many of the cues supporting this are fairly evident. Most critics point to the line of Dupin’s that most men wear “windows in their bosoms,” through which one with the powers of Dupin could glance at the souls of men. That Dupin is characterized specifically as an oracular deity is demonstrated in the episode before the tale’s mystery begins, when, as the narrator and Dupin are strolling along in silence, Dupin suddenly comments on the very idea occupying the narrator’s thoughts. The narrator, stunned, exclaims, “Tell me, for Heaven’s sake [...] the method—if method there is—by which you have been enabled to fathom my soul in this matter” (4:153). Indeed there

was a method, which Dupin proceeds thence to detail to the narrator. The episode demonstrates Dupin's facility with rationality, vis-a-vis deterministic causality, and his ability to make intuitive leaps where necessary. The method of Dupin allows him to fathom the soul of anyone he wishes by looking through the window into the bosom, a quality we associate certainly with the deity.

Robert Daniel, in "Poe's Detective God," evaluates this characterization by examining the language used by the characters who respond to Dupin's analytical feats. The language is, according to Daniel, of the sort reserved for witnesses responding to miracles. He quotes the narrator's response to Dupin's reading of his thoughts: "Dupin," said I, gravely, "this is beyond my comprehension. I do not hesitate to say that I am amazed, and can scarcely credit my senses" (qtd. by Daniel, 107). Daniel comments that "such language is the language appropriate to miracle and, in fact, a miracle has just been wrought. Outbursts of this kind are from now on to accompany the fictional detective's discoveries; they are one of the hardest devices that Poe gave to the form" (107). Daniel goes on to observe that the title "chevalier" sets Dupin further apart from the mass of men, and he notes that when Dupin addresses the mystery of Marie Roget "the police have by this time come to regard his ability as 'little less than miraculous'" (108). Daniel quotes some other passages noting how they indicate incredulity at Dupin's miraculous feats. He calls Dupin a "sort of secular god" and characterizes the stories as "tales of the supernatural," a sort of literature that had been absent from America since the relaxation of religious fervor associated with the puritans, who had been obsessed with phantasms, witches, and devils. Daniel cites Paul Elmer More as determining that with the rise of Romantic literature, there reappeared those sorts of characters, but there were still no figures of "gods, demi-gods, or super-men" (104). Daniel

regards Dupin as a figure who fills this “empty niche” that, in More’s assessment, existed in the literature.

A number of witnesses are questioned when the authorities arrive at the scene of the murder. They are a cosmopolitan lot, being of several different nationalities and each interpreting differently the sounds they heard coming from inside the apartment during the murder. A French witness and an English witness, however, are able to make out the words *sacre*, translated as “heavens,” and *diable*, no doubt referring to the beastly Ourang-Outang, shouted repeatedly during the struggle. Additionally, the expression *mon Dieu* was heard in the voice of a Frenchman. Dupin later reveals to us that “upon these two words [*mon Dieu*]...I have mainly built my hopes of a full solution to the riddle” (3:183). He speculates that the voice was that of the owner of the animal, who had tracked it to the murder site after it escaped him. He places an advertisement in the Parisian paper *Le Monde* indicating that he had found the animal and asking that its owner come retrieve it, conjecturing that the animal would be worth a great deal of money to the sailor. Indeed the sailor does show up and confesses the entire story to Dupin, who, of course, had already divined each event correctly. The linguistic cues assigning meaning to the dichotomous frame are certainly less subtle here, but they are the most important cues for situating “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” a tale that deserves a place next to the finest of Poe’s psychological fiction, into the philosophical context where it belongs. Dupin, inspired by *mon Dieu*, provides the text for the *diable*’s context, locating it symbolically within the suitably cosmic *Le Monde*. If, again, we perceive, guided by numerous non-fiction statements from Poe to the effect, that the state to which we are inexorably compelled, unity with the Godhead, is an effect of our exercise of

rationality, then the symbolic value of the two sides of the Dieu/Diable dichotomy seems clear. Reason is associated with divine goodness and unity, Unreason with danger and chaos.

“The Mystery of Marie Roget” is the most overtly self-referential of the tales. In it, Poe literally plays Dupin by modeling his mystery after an actual event. Poe takes details for his story from actual newspaper accounts of the murder of Mary Rogers in New York, and, as Dupin, attempts to solve the murder of the young woman, which had confounded authorities. No matter that Poe’s conclusions regarding the mystery seem not to have been correct, the story fails because Poe plays Dupin as detective rather than Dupin as artist, losing sight of the analogue he established with the first tale and rediscovered with the third. Hence, the tale still has value symbolically by way of its self-referential conduct and further characterization of Dupin as a God-like figure, but because it discards the metatextual analogy between detective/criminal and reader/artist, the communication between form and substance is lost. There is no revealing of a criminal in the end, and Dupin makes only tentative assumptions, no solution to the crime, based on the evidence. Poe tries his hand at playing Dupin, but then he is not there to write the context for the reader to investigate; that is, the vital metatextual dichotomy is incomplete and the reader has no place in its framework. Poe has no villain and establishes none through his calculations, so the dynamic interplay between Poe and the reader, engendered by the symbolic analogue of it in the tale, is absent, which leaves the piece limp and tedious. Poe understood that the popularity, and, in fact, the artistic quality of the genre, consists precisely in the *author’s* weaving a web for the express purpose of unraveling it and cannot be in the author’s narcissistic domination of the form, which results in the loss of contextual space, normally controlled and supported by authorial intent. It is, in short, monadic rather than dyadic in execution, which frustrates what

is supposed to be its analogue, the dyadic metatextual structure. It is no surprise then that the text written into that space, a few tentative and dubious conclusions on the part of the detective, is incomplete in “Marie Roget.”

For whatever reason Poe may have had, he knew that “The Mystery of Marie Roget” was the weakest of his Dupin tales. He must have learned from the failings of that piece since the succeeding and final tale of ratiocination, “The Purloined Letter,” represents a return to form, literally and figuratively, and, indeed, Poe seemed to think of the tale as his finest effort in the new genre. From the perspective of mere readability, “The Purloined Letter” is tightly structured, having neither the tedious excess of “Marie Roget” nor the prefatory material appended to “Rue Morgue,” and it has a novel and entertaining central conceit that plays on the message of the first tale’s essay regarding what is profound and what is merely complex. The thematic content and artistry of the tale again are to be found intimately connected to formal technique. Poe, as he did in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” exploits the homonymic quality of key words to establish a pattern of associations that serves the dual purpose of mediating the allegory at work and of providing the context for the communication between author and reader.

The ever-inventive Poe contributes in “The Purloined Letter” what would become another convention of the genre—that the solution to the crime lies in the most obvious place, which is hence the last place one would think to look. The villainous Minister D----- has purloined from the royal apartments a letter whose contents could be incriminating or embarrassing for the “royal personage” to whom the letter belongs. Minister D----- apparently wishes to use the letter to blackmail the personage. The police have searched the apartment of Minister D----- taking great pains to look in every possible spot where the letter

could be concealed. The prefect describes the process at length to Dupin, who, while the narrator and the prefect discuss the particulars of the theft and of the search, is formulating the solution to the mystery. The solution, of course, is that Minister D----- has laid the letter in plain view, predicting correctly that the prefect would presume that he had hidden it carefully in some concealed location. Dupin, aware of the relationship between profundity and mere complexity, reasons that it is the simplicity of the crime that confounds the prefect; the police searches were exceedingly complex, organized so because the prefect confused complexity with profundity, the mistake the narrator says in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” is common among those who lack true analytical power. Prefect G----- is playing chess with the superior Minister D-----, as those who seek to unravel the plot’s mystery rather than the text’s mystery play chess with Poe, rather than draughts, the more subtle and intellectually demanding game. There is a place for each agent in the metatextual interchange reflected in the narrative design. The prefect represents another lasting feature that Poe gave to the genre, the bumbling police, and is the narrative representation of those readers who are duped by the “method or air of method” demonstrated by Dupin—the ones who consider the façade, the narrative material, to be the pith of the tale rather than the symbolic communication between formal and thematic substance that is only mediated and imitated by the Dupin plot.

“The Purloined Letter” as a title is another exceptionally clever play on words that serves as a foundation for the web of verbal cues and clues that exist in the tale. Peithman points out that the word “purloin” comes from the root in French *porloigner*, meaning “to put away” (301). Its meaning “to steal” developed only in English. Poe was probably more knowledgeable in French than in any other language, which certainly explains his prodigious

use of Gallicisms, but may also explain, since the Dupin tales are essentially word puzzles of the type that the narrator says the true analyst delights in working, why Poe set his tales in France—for his facility with the language. “To put away,” then, refers to Minister D-----’s method of concealing the letter; he paradoxically found the ideal method of concealment was not to put it away, the converse effect of the “royal personage’s” not putting it away in her chambers, which resulted in its being discovered and purloined (stolen) by Minister D-----. In a bit of a flourish on Poe’s part, retrieving the letter from Minister D----- involves its being purloined yet again, this time by Dupin, who, matching wits with his rival, discovers it in the same circumstance that the minister found it in the royal apartments: it was un-purloined. The winner of the three is the one who purloins it in both senses; Dupin steals it from the Minister’s chambers and conceals it in his coat. Though this particular word puzzle is clever, and it is part of design of the *text* as the mystery, it does little more, substantively, than to establish the relationship between Dupin and Minister D-----. This tale, as much as “William Wilson,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “The Cask of Amontillado” is a doppelganger tale, representing a struggle for power and superiority that, as an allegory, has implications for Poe’s view of cosmic figuration.

The titular letter, the primary textual symbol *and* verbal cue, is exploited for its homonymic qualities as an embodiment and representation of the power of rational comprehension and expression; it represents, to employ another homonymic expression, Poe’s perceived *logos of art*, the logic of cosmic order both upholding and depending from the expression of the word as an exercise of the volition both of God and of the artist. The *letter*, figuratively expressed, is a component of the *word*, which is a component of the *letter* literally expressed, and the Minister’s actions have their symbolic value in the close

association between the figurative and literal appropriations of power that the minister attempts. In an intriguing throwaway line, Dupin indicates that there is some personal relationship between himself and Minister D-----; the Minister had some time in the past done Dupin an “evil turn,” and Dupin relishes the opportunity to aid in his capture. We must wonder what the nature of this “evil turn” could have been but another instance of purloining on the part of the Minister, this time a letter stolen from Dupin himself. The purloined letter “D” represents the figurative parallel to the purloined missive, and allegorizes the conflict between Dupin and Minister D-----. The attempted appropriations of power are symbolically mediated by the linguistic cues provided by Poe. Minister D-----’s suggestive title further reinforces his relationship to the God-like Dupin.

Claude Richard elaborates on the nature of D-----’s attempted appropriation of power; for Richard, D----- exploits the mistake, or lapse, of the queen in order to seize some of the power of the king, who is “the usual representation of power, of God, of the ultimate, of the transcendent.” Richard continues, “...he works on the lapse in order to appropriate the power, which is Godly power, which is at large” (“Interview” 15). D-----’s purloining of power therefore must be a habitual practice since he has already stolen the “D” from the Kingly Dupin in the previous evil turn that the former had done the latter. Moreover, as we know, Poe regarded God as an artist, since the “plots of God are perfect” and “the universe is a plot of God.” Revealingly, then, Dupin and D----- are both poets and D----- is “interested in appropriating some of God’s power because he’s a bad poet” (Richard 15). Dupin, on the other hand, says Richard, “is *the* poet, what the poet should be, according to Poe” (15) because he has the powers necessary for creating perfect art: reason and imagination, in the proper proportions. The struggle for power in the tale is associated with the great primal

lapsarian conflict, which Poe has previously envisioned as the struggle between reason and unreason, or order and chaos. The external conflict depicted between antagonists, here and in the mythology to which the tale refers, is a reframing of the internal conflict of Pym and of the Fisherman in “Maelstrom,” both of whom battle the impulse of unreason within themselves. In the detective stories that impulse is symbolized in the form of an antagonistic other.

When Dupin retrieves the letter from D-----’s apartment, he leaves in its place another letter that contains a passage from Crebillon: “Un dessein si funeste, s’il n’est digne d’Atree est digne de Thyeste” (“so infamous a design, if not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes”). This device further establishes the relationship between Dupin and D-----, as Atreus and Thyestes were brothers, and D----- has not quite demonstrated the acumen of his superior brother-poet Dupin. The passage also serves as a textual cue guiding our interpretation of the letter “D” as a symbol of D-----’s intent to appropriate power. In his “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” Lacan misquotes Poe’s use of the Crebillon passage, substituting the word “destin” (destiny) for “dessein.” This change, according to Richard, profoundly changes the author’s thematic intent. He writes, “Lacan’s version of the quotation, in spite of the over-ingenuous explanations of French and American disciples, simply means what it says: it says that the letter dictates man’s destiny whereas the emphasis in Crebillon’s line was on man’s exercise on his free will, on his *design*” (5). D----- turns out to be the inferior architect of design, while Dupin as God constructs perfect plots of cosmic design, and reclaims the “D-sign,” the symbol of his power, which results in the *lapse* of D-----. The allegory describes the conflict between the perfect design of rational order and the imperfect, necessarily chaotic, design of unreason.

Richard, who, unlike Lacan and Derrida, grounds his interpretation in authorial intent, accomplishes a bit of detective work like that of Irwin's. Interpreting "The Purloined Letter" as a story about the letter "D," Richard cites abundance textual evidence of Poe's design, or d-sign: Minister D-----

has hoarded D's into the cellar of his self: he owns such an excess of letters that he can afford to leave his own letter upon the table, his hotel is called the D----- hotel, all his papers show the D----- sign, he has written on Differential Calculus and his large black seal bears the D----- cipher. More convincingly still, he appears to Dupin as the illegal holder of a stock of illegitimate D's as he, Dupin, "reflects [like a mirror—a very envious mirror—] upon the *daring*, *dashing* and *discriminating* ingenuity of D-----." (9)

Richard continues that he is "not prepared to believe that this is not deliberate" (9). The game of linguistic cues here, though less extensive than in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," is more complex, and indicates very overtly Poe's perceived relationship to the reader. Poe's homonymic use of the word "cipher" here establishes, even more clearly than the prefatory discussion of gaming in "Rue Morgue," the positioning of author and reader in the metatextual dichotomy that is reflected in the plot by D-----, the encoder of information, and Dupin, the decoder. When Dupin goes to the apartment to retrieve the Queen's purloined letter and to reclaim his own purloined letter, he finds there a rack, with three or four compartments, in which "were five or six visiting cards and a solitary letter. This last was much soiled and crumpled. It was torn nearly in two, across the middle—as if a design, in the first instance, to tear it entirely up as worthless, had been altered, or stayed, in the second. It had a large black seal, bearing the D----- cipher *very* conspicuously..." (5: 49). Indeed, Poe's symbolism here is also, fittingly, *very* conspicuous. Dupin recognizes this letter, the missive and, symbolically, the monogram, as the one he is seeking. "Cipher," defined here as an elaborate monogram, also refers to D-----'s method of coding information to keep the letter

away from the police; the letter is, like the monogram, made very conspicuous so that it is paradoxically overlooked by the police, which is the cipher, the code, that Dupin must solve; he must *decipher* the *D*-cipher. It is also the *D*-*sign* and “infamous *design*” to which Dupin refers in the letter containing the passage from Crebillon.

Poe’s careful formal choices here vibrate through the thematic and symbolic substance of the story. The homonymic quality of “cipher” accomplishes the same effect as the use of the word “clue” in “Rue Morgue”; the term is so closely tied to one of the core considerations of the tales of reason—the cryptologic relationship between the author and the reader—that, like the “clue” device, it assumes special significance. The “D” cipher is what Dupin must solve, and the metatextual parallel is the pattern of “D’s” in the story that constitutes the cipher that the reader must solve in order to recognize the allegorical representations of D----- and Dupin as cosmic figures in a struggle for power. The manifold associations accomplished with the coordination of the various meanings of both “cipher” and “letter,” specifically with the placement of the cipher *on* the letter in a literal as well as figurative way, reveals the remarkably complex communication between formal and thematic substance in the story. The monogram “D” refers to the cipher of the concealment of the letter; the cipher that, were it successful, would have resulted in the symbolic appropriation of Dupin’s power through the purloined letter “D”; and the cipher of the pattern of “D’s” (the main puzzle of linguistic cues) meant for the reader to discover. It is the most direct connection that Poe makes between what Dupin represents and what humankind has the potential to become through the exercise of reason and imagination. The relationship is especially cogent here because while the mystery that the reader must solve, as in “Rue Morgue,” is not the same as the mystery that Dupin must solve, Poe, in this story, parallels

the two as closely as possible by locating them both around the same linguistic cues; in that way, Dupin and the reader must both find the purloined letter, one a literal letter, the other a figurative one.

Both “The Purloined Letter” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” are statements of Poe’s larger philosophical vision. As allegories of cosmological figuration and the artist’s place in that design, they position the concept of reason within Poe’s well-established cosmic structure. The connection between reason and divinity that permeates the scientific and science fiction works is given a more tangible treatment in the detective tales, not only because the religious overtones of Dupin’s characterization suggest that the values he embodies are apotheosized in the mind of Poe, but because the reader is invited to participate in this treatment of the quest for reason. Poe’s virtuosic touch with formalist devices provides readers a means for locating themselves in the cosmology symbolized in the conflicts between the God-like Dupin and his adversaries. If they can mimic Dupin and fulfill their role in the metatextual dichotomy and, like Legrand, find the text for the context of encoded information, they associate themselves with the divine act of rational plot construction. Dupin as the artist seeks to construct the perfect plots of God by writing the text into the blank space of context, and as such represents, for Poe, the pinnacle of artistic achievement. Poe reflected in the trials of Arthur Gordon Pym his own struggles with his artistic powers, and in Dupin creates what he seeks to achieve: the perfection of plot, which would associate him, and those readers of his who mimic Dupin in the metatextual mystery, with the reason (and hence, the divine) side of the reason/unreason symbolic dichotomy.

Conclusion

The poststructuralists view science as a narrative to be interpreted and studied as a social construction, which is perhaps why their interpretations of some stories seem so fundamentally at odds with many of Poe's unambiguous and straightforward comments about science and reason. Certainly we as critics approach any author's work from the perspectives that seem right to us, but it is especially evident that for critics in the poststructuralist tradition, text, as Claude Richard observes, is only a pretext for philosophy. Considering the consciousness of his craft that Poe demonstrates, this seems an especially unsuitable way of reading his works accurately. Poe felt that science describes a pattern of universal constants that can be accurately perceived through the powerful combination of reason and imagination; we know that we have found an unquestionable truth through this method when, examining that truth, we find that all of its elements are entirely consistent with one another. Certainly Poe understood that the human *ability* to reason could go astray because the human mind is susceptible to the effects of a dangerous world, but were our ability to reason absolute in every circumstance, we would be God, not human. Therefore, the more we reason, as Poe says in *Marginalia*, the more we approach our natural state, unity with God. If with rational actions we still fail in our endeavors, we have either misunderstood reason or misapplied it; it is not reason itself that has failed us.

Poe had his contradictions, like any other writer, but critics have, it seems, come to regard him as a *mass* of contradictions—a writer of scattered and unpredictable style and quality. If we examine Poe's oeuvre with some respect for the terms that he establishes for his own work, however, a consistent pattern emerges. It is difficult, for example, to reconcile

his comments in the “Quest for Reason” *Marginalia* entry with interpretations that the principle of reason fails Pym, Usher, the fisherman of “Maelstrom,” and the host of others who struggle for survival amid trying circumstances. Of course, the current trends in philosophy and critical theory are biased against, and must necessarily overlook, those works and comments of Poe’s that there exists a fundamentally knowable objective reality. Indeed, some of the interpretations, such as those of “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” *Pym*, and “The Purloined Letter” are convincingly argued, but only outside the context of the rest of the Poe canon. If in Poe’s works we seek philosophical consistency and unity, which was the standard that he strived to achieve and the quality that determines the truth of any phenomena, we find it in the treatment of rationality and truth that permeates the great bulk of his writing.

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