

Spatial and Moral Aspects in Poe's Tales

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(1) The Sense of Place in Edgar Allan Poe

In a recent article in the *New York Times Weekly Review*, John Russell wrote of the power of art to make us "feel at home in the world."

It is fundamental to the white magic of art that it does away with the nightmare of disorientation. Not only does art tell us who we are, but it tells us—or it used to tell us—where we are. And "Where am I?" is, after all, one of the most poignant of human formulations. It speaks for an anxiety that is intense, recurrent and all but unbearable. Not to know where we are is torment, and not to have a sense of place is a most sinister deprivation.¹

One of the things which makes many of Poe's stories so full of terror is that they do *not* tell us where we are, and they are full of "the nightmare of disorientation." In the tales of ratiocination there is not this terror, for we have a clear concept of where we are, whether it is on Sullivan's Island, or in Paris, or in New York.² Those who know Paris well may tell us that Poe's knowledge of the city was inaccurate, but the average reader feels fully confident that Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin could lead us through a labyrinth of Parisian side-streets and alleys to the final solution of the most abstruse of problems. This spatial confidence takes away the horror of the inhuman murder of the

two female persons,³ and allows readers to concentrate their whole attention on that marvellous instrument, the analytic mind of Monsieur Dupin.

It is far otherwise in many of Poe's tales. These tales of the second type take place in fantastic regions where foot of mortal has never trod. And yet the landscape may often be hauntingly and frighteningly familiar, for it is the land of half-forgotten and not quite remembered dreams. Poe may mention some "old, decaying city near the Rhine," or an abbey in "the wildest and least frequented portions of fair England,"⁴ but the geographical references give us no sense of any place where ordinary people might go in and out. In fact, the personages of the *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*⁵ seem isolated from the real world, and inhabitants of a universe of their own. This isolation and spatial disorientation reach their extremity in "The Pit and the Pendulum," which is why the reader feels cheated when an actual historical character enters a real geographical place to rescue the hapless narrator at the crudely artificial ending of the story.⁶ It is as though Poe had abandoned his art because he was weary of the story, or had to meet a deadline, or wanted to go home to supper. Such incongruities, however, are not to be found in most of Poe's great stories. Even in what he calls a "homely narrative" of "mere household events," like "The Black Cat," with its realistic description of the house and place, the reader feels disassociated from any place ever known because of the grotesque and horrifying actions of the narrator.⁷ In many of the stories there is a claustrophobic feeling of being entrapped in an enclosure from which there is no escape, and premature burial, entombment, and narrow confinement are frequent themes.

In contrast to this are a third type, the voyages into the unknown, starting from recognizable and familiar scenes, but going out to some "stupendous ramparts . . . towering away into the desolate sky, and looking like the walls of the universe, . . . hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge—some never to be imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction."⁸ This lure of the unknown which we see in "MS. Found in a Bottle" can also be seen in "A Descent into the Maelstrom."⁹ There the narrator, though seemingly confined within the circumference of the whirlpool, looks down into the depths which seem to lead on to another unknown and mysterious space of secret knowledge. "How magnificent a thing it was to die in such a manner," he muses. "I positively felt a *wish* to explore its depths, . . . and my principal grief was that I should never be able to tell my old companions on shore about the mysteries I should see."¹⁰ Something of the same pattern is found in "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfall,"¹¹ and, although it is mainly non-fiction, in *Eureka* (1848).¹² In *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838),¹³ however, Poe carries this pattern of the voyage from the known to the unknown and unbounded to the ultimate extreme.

Since, as we have remarked, the tales of ratiocination do not normally involve spatial disorientation to any marked degree, let us examine the second and third types, the tales of fantasy where spatial disorientation is often felt throughout, and the voyages where there is movement from the known to the unknown.

Poe uses a number of techniques to achieve spatial disorientation and the consequent terror which accompanies it. The landscape is often fantastic, threatening, and gloomy. Buildings are often old,

dilapidated, gothic, damp, dark, and unhealthy. The dwelling may be a long way from other habitations, in mysterious isolation, as in "The Fall of the House of Usher,"¹⁴ or the abbey for Rowena in "Ligeia." The interior of these houses is cut off from the real world, and even when the narrator looks out the window, he sees only a weird and oppressive sky, with no point of reference. After the horrifying events at the House of Usher the narrator escapes as the house divides into two and disappears into the dark tarn, emphasizing even more strongly its unreality, and raising the question of whether it had existed at all—even in the fictional world—or whether it was not entirely a product of the fevered imagination of the narrator, at whom Roderick had screamed, "Madman!"¹⁵

In addition to the isolation, which we also find in "The Masque of the Red Death,"¹⁶ the interior appointments often blot out all familiar associations and transport us into a world of complete fantasy. Rowena's bridal couch is made of "solid ebony, with a pall-like canopy above." The room was calculated to drive her insane.

The ceiling, of gloomy-looking oak, was excessively lofty, vaulted, and elaborately fretted with the wildest and most grotesque specimens of a semi-Gothic, semi-Druidical device. From out of the most central recess of this melancholy vaulting, depended, by a single chain of gold with long links, a huge censer of the same metal, Saracenic in pattern, and with many perforations so contrived that there writhed in and out of them, as if endued with serpent- vitality, a continual succession of parti-colored fires.¹⁷

Prince Prospero's seven varicolored apartments are almost as fantastic, if not quite so threatening,¹⁸ and Montresor's cellars are just as far removed from the reality which most of us know.¹⁹ In this unfamiliar

setting the reader is further disoriented by winding passages of labyrinthine complexity. In William Wilson's school, "I was never able to ascertain with precision, in what remote locality lay the little sleeping apartment assigned to myself and some eighteen or twenty other scholars."

But the house!—how quaint an old building was this!—to me how veritably a palace of enchantment! There was really no end to its windings—to its incomprehensible subdivisions. It was difficult, at any given time, to say with certainty upon which of its two stories one happened to be. From each room to every other there were sure to be found three or four steps either in ascent or descent. Then the lateral branches were innumerable—inconceivable—and so returning in upon themselves, that our most exact ideas in regard to the whole mansion were not very far different from those with which we pondered upon infinity.²⁰

Disorientation could hardly be carried further! For five years William Wilson lived in this school and explored all its passages, yet, when looking at the school from outside, he could not be sure where his own room was!

The motif of the labyrinth is repeated in many of the stories, such as "The Man of the Crowd," though there the maze is made up of the streets of London.²¹ In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the narrator is conducted "through many dark and intricate passages," and notices sombre tapestries, phantasmagoric armorial trophies, and minute fungi "in a fine tangled web-work."²² In "The Cask of Amontillado," Fortunato is taken down a winding staircase into the catacombs of the Montresors, with their "white web-work" of nitre.²³ The apartments

of Prince Prospero "were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect."²⁴

In this way Poe draws the reader into the labyrinth where the senses of direction and location are obliterated, and where the fantastic surroundings have no counterpart in actual experience, but may be vaguely remembered in fragments of half-recollected dreams. When Poe is at his best, the reader is drawn by an irresistible fascination towards the terrifying danger of the victim, while at the same time wishing to flee from the horror at the core. This produces something akin to the pity and terror which Aristotle defined as being the dynamic of tragedy in his *Poetics*. In Poe the terror is often intensified by spatial disorientation. Not only does one feel trapped or entombed with the victim, but one does not know how, or in which direction, to flee, for one cannot find the answer to the question, "Where am I?"

In the third type of tale we have discussed, the voyage into the unknown, Poe follows a well-known pattern which had been popular in English literature at least since the time of Hakluyt's *Voyages* (1589). As a great admirer from boyhood of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and undoubtedly familiar with *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Poe well knew the importance of verisimilitude achieved by piling up minute realistic detail. His voyages start, as with Robinson and Gulliver, from real points of departure, even though they may be distant places, or remote from the experiences of many readers—Batavia, Nantucket, or Norway's Lofoten above the Arctic Circle.²⁵ From this more or less familiar, or at least imaginable, world, however, the reader is drawn by degrees into an unfamiliar world of terror and spatial disorientation. In this

Poe differs from Defoe and Swift who make their imaginary landscapes gradually familiar to the reader, so that Crusoe at last comes to feel quite at home and happy on his island, and Gulliver is always the man of reason, observing dispassionately the inhabitants of the newly discovered lands and comparing them with the citizens of eighteenth century Europe.

Poe's voyages, on the other hand, lead to more and more mysteries. In "MS. Found in a Bottle" (1833) the narrator finds himself on a wrecked ship in the midst of a terrible storm, and then thrown by the force of collision onto what seems to be the *Flying Dutchman*, hurrying on to that "exciting knowledge" which will be its destruction, "plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool."²⁶ The plunge into the whirlpool is the fate of two brothers in "A Descent into the Maelstrom" (1841), but "the ancient mariner" who tells the story, is able, by a bit of bogus ratiocination, to escape their fate and return to tell the tale. Nevertheless he testifies that when he had "made up [his] mind to hope no more," he lost most of his terror and "felt a wish to explore its depths" and to see its mysteries. In a sort of mystic vision he beholds "a flood of golden glory along the black walls" of the funnel, and "a magnificent rainbow, like that narrow bridge which Mussulmen say is the only pathway between Time and Eternity."²⁷

Here in the tales of the voyages into the unknown, the promise of secret knowledge may seem to soften the terror of spatial disorientation in the whirlpool or the storm and the certain destruction which seems imminent. But on the other hand there is no certain assurance that this secret knowledge is ever attained, even in death; rather there is the possibility that the seeming proximity of this knowledge of the mysteries was in itself a signal of madness. Of course, if we put our

trust in Poe's narrators we may agree with one of them that "the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence,"²⁸ but this possibility, even if we accept it, does little to mitigate the actual terror.

Poe's only full-length novel is *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, and it follows the pattern of a voyage into the unknown. Like others it starts from a known place, in this case Nantucket. The narrator announces his name in the first sentence, just as Ishmael does in *Moby-Dick* (1851); a book which seems to have derived several suggestions from this; and lest we miss the rhythmic resemblance of Pym's name to Poe's, we are informed that his father "had speculated very successfully in stocks of the Edgarton New-Bank."

There is not space in this brief article to outline the long series of adventures and terrors which Pym experiences, but we will note a few places which are directly connected with spatial disorientation. Although the book may give the appearance of having been put hastily together, and Poe seemingly dismissed it in a letter (1840) to William E. Burton as "a very silly book,"²⁹ Harry Levin has shown that the structure has a finely balanced symmetry.³⁰ The rescue by the *Jane Guy*, which divides the plot in two, occurs in the thirteenth of the twenty-five chapters, the exact middle. Mutiny and revenge on the *Grampus* in the first part, are balanced by deception and revenge on Tsalal in the second. Pym is trapped in a coffin-like space in the hold of the *Grampus* in the first half, and entombed in a landslide in the second, and there are other parallels.

The first half of the book is concerned with Pym's adventures on the *Grampus*, shipwreck, and survival, but the second half is dominated by

a strange quest—the search for the South Pole—a point, be it noted, of zero dimension, and with only one direction, north. To understand the lure of the South Pole for Poe, we must realize that he had been fascinated by an extraordinary theory known as “Symmes’s Hole,” put out in a manifesto by John Cleves Symmes in 1818: “I declare the earth is hollow and habitable within . . . that it is open at the poles.”³¹ According to his theory the poles were gigantic vortices in a warm climate, down which ships might pass into the interior of the earth. Symmes’s theory was championed by Jeremiah N. Reynolds, who promoted an expedition for exploration in which he embarked (1829–33). The expedition did sight Antarctica, but found nothing to support Symmes’s theory. In his account, however, Reynolds told of many wonders, including the white whale, Mocha Dick, which later caught the attention of Melville. Reynolds continued to promote antarctic exploration, addressed Congress (1836), and won a grant of \$300,000 for a new expedition. Ironically he was excluded from this voyage, and the position of chronicler was offered to Nathaniel Hawthorne, who, however, declined it. Poe was indignant at Reynolds’s exclusion, and warmly defended him in an article.³² Years later (1849) on his deathbed in his final delirium, as he approached the “South Pole” of the end of his own life, it was the name “Reynolds” that he called repeatedly.³³

Now a hollow “Mother Earth” with an opening for entry and egress is a symbol too obvious to need comment. Poe does not mention Symmes’s theory in the novel, but its attraction is clear. After a final escape in a canoe from the island of Tsalal, Pym and his companion, Dirk Peters, head south, starting at about 84 degrees South Latitude, a

distance further south than had ever been attained by any navigator. The ocean becomes *warmer* and "of a milky consistency and hue,"³⁴ maternal characteristics in keeping with its French and Latin names.³⁵ Just nine months (the period of gestation) after leaving Nantucket,³⁶ they approach what must be "the South Pole" itself, borne on by a powerful current.

And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of snow.³⁷

Thus ends the book, except for a final Note. The gender of the figure is not given, but there are several hints, such as the warm, milky water, which may lead us to assume that it is a woman, perhaps "the Great Earth Mother." In the last year of his life (1849) Poe was arrested in Philadelphia during a fit which must have been brought on partly by insanity and partly by drink. On the ramparts of Moyamensing Prison he reported seeing a white-robed phantom woman who spoke to him in whispers. "If I had not heard what she said," Poe declared, "it would have been the end of me."³⁸

Marie Bonaparte has elaborated at great length and detail her psychological interpretation of Poe's fixation on his lost mother, and his unconscious desire to return to the womb.³⁹ Given the evidence of *Pym* and of many of the tales and poems, this interpretation seems quite convincing. It explains the preoccupation with entombment and premature burial, with whirlpools and vortices, with winding passages

and dark houses. The progress of Prospero through the six apartments in "The Masque of the Red Death," to the final black room, may be compared to the imagined return to the dark womb, where the tick of the clock recalls the steady beat of the mother's heart, but the breaking of the taboo brings certain death. The tales of voyages to the unknown may be reconstructions of the terrors of the almost remembered journey from the watery, warm darkness of the womb, through the frightening passage of the birth canal, and into the blinding, pitiless light, and cold, dry air of the outside world. Or they may be the forbidden attempt to return, "to penetrate the mysteries," to find that "exciting knowledge," that "never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction."⁴⁰

Whatever the direction of the voyage, whether the terrifying descent from the place of security and peace remembered only in dreams, or the even more frightening ascent and return against all interdicts, we can hear the lonely cry of the lost soul: "Where am I?" and "Why did I awake? When shall I sleep again?"⁴¹ It is this lostness, this spatial disorientation, echoed in our half-remembered dreams, that gives to many of Poe's tales their poignancy and their terror.

(2) "The Great Moral" in "The Masque of the Red Death"

Poe's tales are full of archetypal myths. Like myths and fairy tales they are often read by children, but they continue to have a strange fascination in later years. Like myths they are related to the primordial experiences, dreams, longings, and fears of humanity, and they bear a relationship to the experiences and dreams of other peoples recorded

in the literature of the world. To trace these relationships has in itself a fascination and has exercised critics and readers for many years, causing them to search for sources and parallels and try to read the mind of Poe himself, just as Dupin read the thoughts of his companion.⁴²

"The Masque of the Red Death" is one of these tales which has become a part of our inherited mythology. The theme of the safe enclosure is as old as the stronghold of the caveman and has its origin in the animal and even the vegetable world. "The family within and the enemy without" is built into the pattern of nature for the preservation of the species. But protection challenges aggression in "Nature, red in tooth and claw,"⁴³ and manifold are the methods which evolution has devised to invade and destroy, to deposit the lethal spore within the protecting cell, or, by slow secretion, to penetrate the outer shell and take the clam within, as conchologist Poe well knew. The citadel invites the siege, the tower calls forth the tunnel, and the massive walls are overcome by spies within and Danaan gifts left temptingly without.⁴⁴

"The last enemy . . . is death," says the Apostle Paul,⁴⁵ and how to keep death out of the secret garden of delight has been the problem of kings in myths and fairy tales from ancient times. For Shakespeare's King Richard the Second the attempt was doomed from the start.

For within the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court, and there the antick sits
Scoffing at his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene
To monarchize, be fear'd, and kill with looks,

Infusing him with self and vain conceit
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable; and humour'd thus
Comes at the last, and with a little pin
Bores through the castle wall; and farewell king!

(*Richard the Second*, III, ii, 160-169)

Prince Prospero, however, is resolved to keep the Red Death without, and he welds the bolts of his gates so that there might be "neither of ingress or egress."

The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think. The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure . . . there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the "Red Death."⁴⁶

Now the reader familiar with the Bible, as Poe and almost all his contemporary readers undoubtedly were, on reading these lines, is already aware, consciously or unconsciously, of the irony of the words. Many would recall the complacency of the rich fool in Luke 12: 19-20; "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee. Then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?"

Other less familiar words might not come immediately to mind: "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (I Cor. 10:12); or "When they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them" (I Thess. 5:3). But when we read at the end of the story, "And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death.

He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers . . ." the phrase, "thief in the night," will strike a familiar chord in most readers. It is, in fact, the phrase immediately preceding the sentence quoted above from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians: "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them . . ." (I Thess. 5:2).

Whether Poe was conscious of these borrowings and associations we do not know, but unconsciously the biblical stories and sayings familiar from childhood, whether heard at home, or in the services at the Manor School, Stoke Newington, or at church in Richmond, were undoubtedly a part of his thoughts and ideas. Poe usually avoided quoting the Bible directly, but this tale suggests several parables and sayings in the New Testament.

The first one of these we have already quoted from, the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21). This is a very short similitude told to warn against covetousness and reliance on material possessions. It tells in a few words of a man whose fields brought forth plenteously. After building bigger barns to store his abundance, he says to himself, "Soul, . . . take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." But God says, "Thou fool, this night shall thy soul be required of thee; then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?" And Jesus added, "So is he that layeth up treasures for himself, and is not rich to God." This last phrase, we know from the context of the gospels, especially Luke and passages like Matthew 25:31-46, means helping the poor, the sick, the widows, the orphans, and the outcasts.

The parallel with "The Masque of the Red Death" may seem faint,

but if the echo of it lingered in the back of Poe's mind when he wrote this tale, it would add a moral dimension. Of this story Arthur Hobson Quinn writes:

With a restraint that is one of the surest marks of genius, Poe gives no hint of the great moral the tale tells to those who can think. For others, he had no message.⁴⁷

But Quinn does not tell us what the "great moral" is and, as Joseph Patrick Roppolo remarks, "leaves his reader to place himself among the thinkers or, unhappily, among the non-thinkers, disdaining to make explicit or even to suggest the 'great moral' which Poe shields behind his 'Masque.'"⁴⁸ Poe, in "The Poetic Principle" was emphatic in condemning the "heresy of the didactic" which demands that "every poem . . . should inculcate a moral . . ."⁴⁹ He was consistent in his principles by eschewing moralism in his tales also. Yet the moral dimension was not and could not be completely excluded from all the tales, and though they are never didactic, it was impossible to banish utterly the moral element from such stories as "William Wilson," or "The Tell-Tale Heart," where conscience plays an important part. Nor was it only "the dampness of the catacombs that made" Montresor recall after fifty years, "My heart grew sick."⁵⁰ "Men die nightly in their beds, wringing the hands of ghostly confessors, and looking them piteously in the eyes, . . ." says the narrator of "The Man of the Crowd."⁵¹ Guilt, remorse, and the broken ordinance are prominent in many of Poe's tales and cannot be completely separated from the moral dimension.

Prince Prospero was like the rich man in the parable who thought

he could ignore the needs of the world and could live separately and securely, surrounded by his riches, eating, drinking, and being merry. Yet he could not exclude time and death from that enclosed world, and all his riches and his pleasures were taken from him at one stroke. It is perhaps not a coincidence that his name, Prospero, suggests a rich man,⁵² although the ruler of *The Tempest's* island autocracy is undoubtedly the primary source.

There is another parable which may have influenced Poe in writing this story. It is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16: 19-31. Here the parallel is even stronger, for the poor and the sick, personified in Lazarus, are kept outside the gate, while Dives (to use the Vulgate's translation) "was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day" within. As in "The Masque of the Red Death," those without die first, and then death comes also to Dives within. But here the roles are reversed, for now Lazarus is in the enclosure, in the bosom of Abraham, in peace and security, and Dives is without, the "walls" having been inverted to become "a great gulf," or "*chaos magnum*," as the Latin has it. It should be observed, parenthetically, that Poe used a pre-industrial, medieval setting for his story, perhaps suggested by Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and Jesus used the cosmogony and eschatology of late apocalyptic Judaism, perhaps reshaping older materials and stories for his purposes, which certainly did *not* include those of giving a map of the topography of heaven and hell.

In the parable, the rich man calls to Abraham, beseeching that Lazarus might come and touch his tongue with the tip of his finger dipped in water, for he is in much torment from the flames. But Abraham reminds him that in his lifetime he had received his good

things and Lazarus evil things. "And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that come from thence." The rich man, who now for the first time may be aware of his former neglect and callousness towards Lazarus' plight, bestirs himself to think, at last, not of himself, but of others, even though they are only the members of his own immediate family, all, be it noted, males. (Did he have no sisters, or were they, like the rest of the world, considered unimportant?) He prays that Lazarus may be sent to his house to testify to his five brothers, "lest they also come into this place of torment." But Abraham reminds him that, "They have Moses and the prophets: let them hear them." Dives protests, "Nay, father Abraham, but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent." To which Abraham replies, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

Now this is exactly the case with Prince Prospero, who not only had the teaching of Moses and the prophets to guide him but over a thousand years of the Christian church's teaching on charity. Yet when the mummer comes to him in the form of one who has risen from the dead, he does not take warning. Instead, the prince rushes furiously after the intruder in the attempt to murder death itself, only to become the victim of the great destroyer. Not all his riches, nor his thousand friends who had bid "the external world . . . take care of itself," could save him, and they themselves became victims of avenging death.

It has been observed by many scholars that there is a strange relationship between the reference in the parable of Dives and Lazarus to

one who should rise from the dead, and the account of that other Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. The description of this Lazarus as he comes forth from the cave-tomb is remarkably similar to that of the mummer of the Red Death. "The dead man came out, his hands and his feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth" (John 11:44).

Of course the figure of death also suggests the traditional image of Father Time, which Poe uses in "The Pit and the Pendulum." The association of the destroying Titan father, Kronos, with the universal destroyer, time, or *chronos*, was a natural one, and is echoed in "the mummer, whose tall figure stood erect and motionless within the shadow of the ebony clock." That all are subject to time and death is, of course, a moral truth, but it is hardly an original discovery of Poe. Rather, if Poe had a moral implicit in his story, though not overtly stated, it is in the condemnation of the indifference to others' suffering and the selfish absorption in one's own pleasures.

A number of other related parables and sayings could be mentioned, such as those in Luke 11:24-26, Matthew 24:43, and Luke 11:21-22. Poe's imagination, of course, did not need any of these biblical parallels to suggest the theme or the course of his story, but the words familiar to him from his childhood must have formed an undercurrent of his thought. There is no mistaking the biblical style of much of the narrative. The final paragraph is a clear echo of the style of the King James Version. Five of the six sentences begin with "And." The remaining sentence, "He had come like a thief in the night," contains, as we have seen, a direct quotation.

Finding biblical parallels in almost any author is not difficult, but

the significant thing about the two Lukan "rich man" parables is that they have a moral thrust which is directly connected with Poe's tale, although it is almost completely concealed. As we have already noted, Poe was adamant in excluding didactic moralism from his art, and certainly no traces of such can be found in "The Masque of the Red Death." Yet is there not an underlying, if unstated, condemnation of the rich who close their gates upon the poor and the sick to enjoy their selfish pleasures, excluding the world, and trusting in their own possessions?

There can be no doubt that Poe was fascinated by the possibility of great wealth, which he coveted and thought he deserved and had been wrongfully deprived of. This is obvious in tale after tale which give the protagonists great wealth and ancient lineage. But Poe was also scornful of materialism and resentful of his dependence on the rich, many of whom he despised. While Poe was editor of *Graham's Magazine* the circulation rose from 5,000 to 40,000, but his salary remained at only \$800 a year, while Graham made a fortune. Poe had to support his wife, Virginia, who was sick and had her first lung hemorrhage in January, 1842, as well as his mother-in-law, Maria Clemm. "The Masque of the Red Death" was published that May, in the last issue of which Poe was editor of *Graham's Magazine*.⁵³ There must have been many times in his life when Poe felt like Lazarus outside the gate who had to be content "with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table."

In almost all Poe's tales there seems to be a total absence of social conscience or concern for society outside the circumscribed life of the actors themselves. The unique thing about "The Masque of the Red

Death" is that this lack of concern is stated explicitly and consciously. "The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think." Nowhere else in Poe's tales do the rich seem even aware that there is an outside world, nor do the narrators mention it with any concern or sympathy. This explicit and ironic acknowledgement, so unusual in Poe, of the outside world, where the multitudes were dying under miserable conditions, should be a hint that there is a moral dimension to this story, though Poe, for artistic reasons, could not state it overtly. Because it is concealed, it may not be the main theme, but it is there nevertheless. And it is precisely this theme, the condemnation of the self-centered insensitiveness to the needs of others, that is the heart of the two parables of Dives, the prosperous one. Arthur Hobson Quinn was right when he saw a "great moral" in this story. It is not the commonplace that death is inevitable, but the moral imperative to see the world as one and not to be blind and deaf to the needs of others.

Notes

- 1 *The New York Times Weekly Review*, April 12, 1981, p. 8.
- 2 References are to "The Gold Bug" (Sullivan's Island, S. C.); "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" (Paris); and "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (New York, although the fictional location is placed in Paris).
- 3 Edgar Allan Poe, *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: Tales and Sketches*, Vols. II & III, edited by Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 537. Hereinafter all references to the tales will be to this edition, which will be referred to as *Works*.
- 4 *Works*, p. 310, and p. 320.
- 5 This was the title of the two-volume collection of Poe's tales published in

Philadelphia in 1840, but I would include many tales written after that date.

- 6 *Works*, p. 697.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 847-60.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 574-97.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 588-89.
- 11 *The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Harold Beaver (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 12-64. This and several other "tales" were excluded by Mabbott, perhaps because he thought it was a journalistic hoax, rather than a true tale, or perhaps because of its length, but the distinction seems rather arbitrary to me.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 205-309. *Eureka* was excluded for the same reasons as noted above, but with much better justification. The present edition is highly recommended for its excellent editing and notes.
- 13 Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, edited by Harold Beaver (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975). This excellent edition will henceforth be referred to as *Pym*.
- 14 *Works*, pp. 392-422.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 416.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 667-78, especially pp. 670-71.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 321-22.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 671-73.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 1258-63.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 429.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 505-18.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 400.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 1258-59.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 671.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 135; *Pym*, p. 47; *Works*, p. 578, and Note 4, p. 595.
- 26 *Works*, p. 140, pp. 145-46.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 585-94.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 638.
- 29 Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1941), p. 298.

- 30 Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), pp. 114-15.
- 31 *Pym*, pp. 10-11. Also quoted in the edition edited by Sidney Kaplan (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. xiii.
- 32 *Pym*, pp. 12-14.
- 33 Quinn, *op. cit.*, p. 640; and *Pym*, p. 14.
- 34 *Pym*, p. 237.
- 35 Especially French in which the pronunciation is the same: *la mère, la mer*. It is also interesting that the Chinese character for sea 海 has the character for mother 母 in it, and the Japanese word for sea, "*umi*," also means "giving birth."
- 36 *Pym*, p. 59 (June) to p. 238 (March 22).
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 239.
- 38 Hervey Allen, *Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), p. 817.
- 39 Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation* (New York: Humanities Press, 1971), pp. 290-352. Poe's attachment to his lost mother is confirmed in a letter to Nathaniel Beverley Tucker of December 1, 1835: "In speaking of my mother you have touched a string to which my heart fully responds. To have known her is to be an object of great interest in my eyes. I myself never knew her—and never knew the affection of a father. Both died (as you may remember) within a few weeks of each other. I have many occasional dealings with Adversity—but the want of parental affection has been the heaviest of my trials." (Quoted in Beverley D. Tucker, *Nathaniel Beverley Tucker: Prophet of the Confederacy: 1784-1851*. Tokyo: Nan'un-do Company, Ltd., 1979, p. 291.)
- 40 *Works*, p. 145.
- 41 A. E. Housman, *The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), p. 52.
- 42 *Works*, pp. 533-37.
- 43 Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, LVI, 15.
- 44 Virgil, *Aeneid*, II, 49.
- 45 I Corinthians 15:26.
- 46 *Works*, pp. 667-78.

- 47 Quinn, *op. cit.*, p. 331.
- 48 Joseph Patrick Roppolo, "Meaning and 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" *Tulane Studies in English*, XIII (1963), 55-69. Reprinted in *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967) p. 137.
- 49 "The Poetic Principle," in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by James A. Harrison (1902; rpt. New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1965) XIV, 271.
- 50 *Works*, p. 1269.
- 51 *Ibid.*, pp. 505-18.
- 52 The name, "Prospero," may possibly have been suggested by the original Greek text of the parable, in which "*plousios*" is the word for "rich man." The fact that "Prospero" rhymes with "Edgar Poe" may also seem suggestive when we remember the name of his heroes, "Arthur Gordon Pym" and "C. Auguste Dupin," and the fact that "Legrand" is an acrostic of cryptographer Poe's first two names, "Edgar Allan," if we discard the repeated letters.
- 53 Quinn, *op. cit.*, pp. 309, 341-44.