“In the Star Mirroring Depths of Lonely Wells”: The Sublimity of Oneness in the Poetry of Edgar Poe

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ABSTRACT

In "The Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe made his well-known assertion that "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (Thompson 680), a proposition that by 1846, when the essay was published, had long been the principal motif in many of his poems, beginning with the release of *Tamerlane and Other Poems. By a Bostonian* in 1827, when the poet was eighteen. "Tamerlane," the title poem of that volume, was the first of many poems the death of a beautiful woman and the derivative motifs that follow this death, which are the subject of this inquiry. These corollary and repetitive motifs include *the voice of the bereaved lover, love cultivated from childhood*, *a love above all loves, a lost paradise, envious angels, an absence or muting of the demonic, somnambulance or dream state, the soul's enshrinement of the beloved,* which implies *sacrality* and *ideality, elevated language that satisfies this sacrality,* and the notion of *impossibility*, the impossibility of being with the beloved or of regaining paradise, both of which imply *a yearning to be with the beloved in the supernal*. This study identifies and dissects the poems that feature these motifs, offering possible clarity not only for reasons Poe returned to the same theme and its variations again and again, but for the lean output of his verse as well, especially when compared to his prose. Since "Annabel Lee" is the last poem Poe composed, and because it possesses *all* the motifs listed, it is central to this study and maintains a presence throughout. A treatment of *Eureka* and "The Fall of the House of Usher" helps clarify and demonstrate certain governing dynamics of Poe's verse, specifically the notion of *saturation* and *collapse*.

Keywords: thematic unity, motifs, governing dynamics, poetic theory, sublimity, unity of effect.

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Introduction — A Uni-Verse in Poe: *Eureka* and "Annabel Lee"

Of the two late masterpieces of Edgar Allan Poe, one is a work of prose published March 1848, a piece of some length entitled *Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe*. The other is a poem composed in the spring of the following year called "Annabel Lee." There is no real likeness between the two, no conspicuous genetic ties or resemblances. It is difficult to imagine he wrote one with the other in mind. One is a scientific treatise—imaginative, daring, provocative, visionary, meticulously crafted, and well-informed. The other, a ballad—moonlit, elegiac, haunted, serene, otherworldly, agonized but sweet, as beautiful as dark—a love song. "Annabel Lee" is the last poem Poe would write, and, according to Thomas Ollive Mabbott, "he seems to have thought it would be" (1.469). *Eureka*, while not necessarily his last work of prose, was, in Poe's estimation, a crown of achievement, one that helped make sense out of life. On 7 July 1849, he wrote the following to his mother-in-law, Maria Clemm, whom Poe and his wife, Virginia, had lovingly called "Muddy:" "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" (*Letters* 452). But accomplish he did, and magnificently too. "Annabel Lee" is the result. Poe died on 7 October, three months after writing those words to Muddy, five months after writing "Annabel Lee."

Though death seems to have occupied his thoughts throughout his life in one way, one manifestation, one intensity or another, imagined or otherwise, these two works represent the finale, the dénouement of his own tragic tale, a tale of two Poes, exposing death's peculiar station, its curious possession between them, the one thing these two works have in common. Or is it? Is there, rather, an "intimate connection between his theoretical writings and his poetic practice" (McGann 6)? Are there governing dynamics common to both, something quintessentially Poe? Because he asks that *Eureka* be referred to as a prose poem, the threshold between it and the remainder of his work becomes porous, translucent; the understanding of the

one offering a way in or cues to understanding the other. Indeed, it has been suggested by certain scholars that to understand the works of Poe, a knowledge of *Eureka* is indispensable. Poe's excitement for "Annabel Lee" may not be of the same character or intensity as that which he felt for *Eureka*, he nonetheless "circulated the poem among his friends far more widely than was usual for him" (Mabbott 1.475). He sent a copy to Rufus Griswold to be included in the tenth edition of *The Poets and Poetry of America,* and to John W. Moore to whom he owed money, saying, "Moore, I may never be able to repay you, but take this: some day it may be valuable" (qtd. in Mabbot), and another to John R. Thompson "in payment of a five-dollar debt."

According to *Eureka*, the narrative arc of the universe is essentially a diffusion, a propelling outward of matter from a single primordial particle. This dispersal of matter "harbors potential energy, the power of all and the universe in one point, Unity" (Vincelette 39). At some appointed time that matter returns back to its source, that is, back to Unity, and with it the annihilation of all things, only to repeat the cycle over and over. It is set in motion at the volition of God, who is the plotmaker, the divine poet. *Eureka* is Poe's treatise on the mechanics of that universe. With it, he seeks "to create an analogy between poetic creation and the creation of the universe." Because poetry exerts the strongest gravitational attraction for Poe, *Eureka* offers poetics by other means—more comprehensive, symphonic, with an infinity of stars, constellations, clusters, and galactic expanses, a celestial playing field whereon his genius can range, offering ways to consider, rethink, and talk about poetry. Poet and literary scholar Charles Bernstein thinks of it in terms of constellations of meaning within a linguistic system, a construct he refers to as *echopoetics*, defined as the "nonlinear resonance of one motif bouncing off another within the aesthetics of constellation" (x). This model works seamlessly with Poe, due to a strange, though precise math that charms meaning from shadows and allusion. Continuing his

definition of echopoetics, Bernstein adds that it is "the sensation of allusion in the absence of allusion. In other words, the echo I'm after is a blank: a shadow of an absent source." What this suggests is that meaning is often acquired not by clear statements but, literally, in or by echo, spectral response of things unsaid or missing, a notion not far removed from Keats's great line from "Ode on a Grecian Urn:" "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on" (*Complete Poetry* 294). Poe consigns unheard music, a function of echopoetics, to the undercurrent of a poem. In his universe, as set out in *Eureka*, every diffused particle sent out from the primordial particle retains an echo of its original unity. Playing galactic traffic cop within a constellation of motifs, echopoetics offers a convenient way of clarifying those corollary motifs in Poe that resonate with and from the death of a beautiful woman, Poe's principal motif, deriving meaning, as it does, by and from relationship and sonic reverberations, shadows of shadows, in the strange science of resonance and influence.

Deriving poetic theory from *Eureka* can be a bit like staring at the renaissance portrait, "The Ambassadors," by Hans Holbein the Younger, of two ambassadors standing by a table with some distorted out-of-place image in the space before them, an image that can only be identified by standing to one side of the painting at a particular angle. Only then does the death's head become visible. Take, for example, the third article in *Eureka* (there are 266 articles, or paragraphs). Poe is introducing his grand design, his scientific treatise on the universe. Articles one and two are merely preamble, Poe with his usual apologetics: "It is with humility really unassumed—it is with sentiment even of awe," he writes in article one, "that I pen the open sentence of this work; for all conceivable subjects I approach the reader with the most solemn—the most comprehensive—the most difficult—the most august" (7). A bit formal, pretentiously stiff, even so, he is really good at this. It is a courtesy he exercises in all of his published works

of poetry. “What terms shall I find sufficiently in their sublimity,” he continues in the second article, “sufficiently sublime in their simplicity—for the mere enunciation of my theme?” With article three, he gets down to the business of his treatise. The following statement, though he is introducing a scientific theory, applies perfectly well to poetic theory which is certainly an amalgam of the “physical, metaphysical, and mathematical,” and so on.

> I design to speak of the *Physical, Metaphysical and Mathematical—of the Material and Spiritual Universe:—of its Essence, its Origin, its Creation, its Present Condition and its Destiny*. I shall be so rash, moreover, as to challenge the conclusions, and thus, in effect, to question the sagacity, of many of the greatest and most justly reverenced of men. (7)

Borrowed from the passage above, the following might provide a subtitle for “The Poetic Principle,” or any of Poe’s three essays on poetic theory: “The Poetic Principle: The Physical, Metaphysical and Mathematical—of the Material and Spiritual Universe:—of its Essence, its Origin, its Creation, its Present Condition and its Destiny.” This is, of course, conjectural play, but this imaginary retitling seems to work, and the point is made. In *Eureka*, God is a poet, much like Poe.

Central to this study is not just the collusion, the sheer and porous borderline between *Eureka* and Poe’s verse, or that they trade secrets, but primarily his notion of sublime Oneness, that is, Original Unity which reflects singularity of theme and its derivative motifs that are repeated again and again, poem after poem. Poe’s notion of *Unity of Effect*, as expounded and demonstrated in “The Philosophy of Composition” and elsewhere, being, as it is, a necessary component of both his prose and his verse, is plainly mirrored in his persistent emphasis on Original Unity, that to which all things return. Indeed, Unity, as defined in *Eureka*, is, in essence, Poe’s cosmological version of the Unity of Effect. If there is a narrative arc to the universe, and there is, a comparable arc exists in the career of Poe’s verse as well, one that spans from the earliest to the last poem he writes. Poetic “matter” emanates from a primordial source, leaving

artifacts, genotypical fragments that reflect the sonic image of its "parent" and by the compelling of a force of attraction will, in a figurative sense, return to its source, that is, to its "parent," reflecting the "oneness" or thematic unity of Poe's verse. The "sublimity of its oneness," as Poe refers to it, is further expounded in Chapter 5, and, by a convenient exercise in paronomasia, this construct for both "Annabel Lee" and *Eureka* might be renamed quite fittingly as the "uni-verse," a term with a variety of meanings perhaps but for the purposes of this study it denotes *one* verse, *one* word, *one* song, suggesting a homogeneity of theme of many of Poe's poems. If *Eureka* must be read for a more thorough understanding of the works of Poe as suggested above, in like manner "Annabel Lee" becomes a divining rod, an intuitive means of detection and penetration for not only a more comprehensive understanding of the poems that precede her (to gender the poem), but to help explain the evolutionary states of the poems, and that of the poet, as they become detectable. Another way to say that might be, to paraphrase poet and critic Daniel Hoffman, if Poe's early works are a rehearsal for *Eureka*, in like manner most of the early poems in Poe's oeuvre become a rehearsal for "Annabel Lee."

It may be said, therefore, that while "Annabel Lee" is the latest and newest of Poe's verse, it is also the oldest, whose genetics can be traced from Poe's earliest published works. By the time Poe writes "Annabel Lee," the poem is old in him already. All the elements by which it is composed, all the motifs, the necessary parts demonstrated in this study, are, in a mystic sense, making their way forward, so to speak, to their parent, being refined, purged, tested, altered, held, as it were, in a kind of suspension until their return. In a way that is so quintessentially Poe, even though "Annabel Lee" is his valediction, because of the mechanics of the arc, and because of its internal "matter," not to mention that it has not been written yet, it becomes the apparition that haunts his earlier poems with presence (even as it haunts the poet), as if those poems are

sustained and informed as by a benevolent spirit. A mystery as profound as it is delicious, "Annabel Lee" becomes, in this sense, the "lonely spirit guiding," of one of his earliest poems ["A Dream"]. In that same spirit, "Annabel Lee" will maintain a phantom presence in each of the five chapters of this study, the motifs being "hers," so to speak.

Though "Annabel Lee" and *Eureka* are as foreign to one another, as disparate as two works by the same author can be, both are the product of long vigilance, of a watch kept over a lifetime, one in the arena of science, innovation, and cultural evolution, the other from a darker, more barren place—the haunt of orphans, of lost and broken men, without love, warmth, or means, where salvation is a woman—mother, lover, "wifey," the angel at the end of words—as the poems testify. With the exception of one brief season, union of a romantic nature was a thing denied to Poe all his life, which may help explain his gravitation to its themes. While this inquiry does not pretend psychological sophistication, one need only read Poe's 1848-1849 letters to Annie Richmond, to Sarah Helen Whitman, and to Elmira Royster Shelton, for clarity on this subject. The sublimity of oneness is, therefore, of a much grander dimension than first thought. It becomes primum mobile, the center, the well from whose "star mirroring depths" both his scientific and poetic life was drawn.

ARGUMENT

The death of a beautiful woman is a motif Poe returned to again and again in his poetry, from "Tamerlane" to "Annabel Lee," that is, from his earliest poems to his very latest, the foundational theme being fashioned from a confluence of three things: death, beauty, and love. Derivative motifs that follow the death of a beautiful woman, include *the voice of the bereaved lover, a lost paradise, the enshrinement of the beloved* which implies a *sacrality* and *ideality*, *the impossibility of reunion with the beloved, the absence or muting of the demonic*, and *angelic envy*. The intent of this study is to identify and dissect those poems that feature these motifs, demonstrating a homogeneity of theme detectable throughout a good portion of Poe's verse, both early and late. This becomes, by secondary cause, a study of certain aspects of Poe's poetic theory including perspective on the lean output of his verse. It will be argued that "Annabel Lee" is not only the finale, Poe's valediction, but because it is the single poem that incorporates *all* of the motifs identified in this study, it maintains an invisible, remote, and inchoate presence throughout the canon. As for organization and structure, select poems from each of Poe's published works from 1827 to 1845 and beyond will be expounded, highlighting motifs and the subtleties of evolutionary movement toward the finale, keeping "Annabel Lee" within reach at all times. All poems are taken from *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe,* Volume One, edited by Thomas Ollive Mabbott. The version of each poem, according to Mabbott's classification, is in brackets starting with [A] being the earliest version of a text. All tales referenced in this study are from Volume Two of Mabbott. *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by G. R. Thompson provides the source of Poe's "Philosophy of Composition," and various commentary.

Letters of Edgar Poe are from Volumes One and Two of *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by John Ward Ostrom.

Secondly, by identifying strategic components of *Eureka* and "The Fall of the House of Usher," this study will introduce, define, and demonstrate the notion of *saturation* and *collapse,* what it means and its influence not only on Poe's verse but on elements of his prose and its universal application for literature proper. This cycle is addressed as a governing dynamic of Poe's verse, particularly though not exclusively of his more musical [metrical] poems. This cycle is illustrated by a study of a specific architectural characteristic of Roderick Usher's guitar, a trait of the instrument that will provide a striking image of saturation and collapse, providing perspective on the instrument that is currently absent in general Poe scholarship.

Jerome McGann's *Edgar Allan Poe: Alien Angel*, has been of tremendous value, particularly for his Dantean reading of "Annabel Lee." Richard Kopley's grand new critical biography, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Life*, remained within arm's length throughout. This study has drawn significantly, as well, from the scholarship and wit of Daniel Hoffman, whose book on Poe, not unlike its author, is possessed of too singular a spirit and too attractive a vitality not to put it to effective use. Charity McAdams's *Poe and the Idea of Music* offered a much wider berth of understanding not only Poe's musicality, but also the undercurrent of a Poe poem, how and what to listen for.

CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

Chapter 1, "The Mystery Which Binds Me Still": An Inventory of Verse" offers probable explanation for the lean output of Poe's verse compared to his prose. It includes notable opinion, both in classic and current studies, on this oddity of the Poe canon. Secondly, it inventories the

derivative motifs in Poe's verse, common to many poems in each of his four published works—the death of a beautiful woman, the voice of the bereaved lover, the lost paradise, and others, accompanied with commentary and samples from Poe's verse.

The subtitle of Chapter 2, "Flashes of true Fire": From "Tamerlane" to "Tamerlane," indicates the trajectory of this chapter, which includes a treatment of select poems that range from the first version of "Tamerlane" [A] as it appeared in *Tamerlane and Other Poems. By a Bostonian* in 1827 to its final [H] version in *The Raven and Other Poems* 1845, concentration being on those motifs introduced above. What is most striking about "Tamerlane" is that from its earliest [A] version, the motifs observed in this study are present already. The poems examined include "Tamerlane," "Dreams," "A Dream," "Lenore," "A Paean," and select others.

Chapter 3, "A Guitar Reading of Usher: A Study in Collapse" covers one of the most primitive of all governing dynamics not only in Poe's poetic theory, but as it is demonstrated in in Poe's prose poem, *Eureka*, that is, the cycle of *saturation and collapse*. Distinct architectural features of Roderick Usher's guitar provide a striking metaphor to understand this most fundamental of poetic and cosmological phenomenon. This consistent and ever-present component of Poe's verse works particularly well with Poe's metrical verse, creating subtleties of effect that have more to do with physics of a poem. This chapter features "The Haunted Palace."

Chapter 4, "Deep into that darkness peering": *The Raven and Other Poems* [1845]. In like manner as Chapter 2, this chapter expounds Poe's latter poems, those that satisfy the requirements of this study (identification and analysis of poems for their specific thematic content). The poems include "To One in Paradise," "The Sleeper," "The Raven," "Ulalume," "Lenore," and select others.

Chapter 5, "'The Lost Parent': 'Annabel Lee' as Imaginative Inheritrix" responds to the question, "How can a more refined comprehension of 'Annabel Lee' provide a key to greater clarity of the entirety of Poe's verse?" How can it be the "the lonely spirit guiding" of an entire collection of poems since it is the last he will ever write? This chapter will address these questions and those generated by them. Center stage is the narrative arc of both *Eureka* and "Annabel Lee," noting harmonic sympathies between the two, metaphorical likenesses, and the central notion of Unity. Poe's Unity of Effect is expounded against the notion of Original Unity in *Eureka*, along with certain features of "William Wilson" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" as they reflect certain aspects of *Eureka*.

Epilogue — "And Music at the Close." There are certain points that can be made concerning Poe's last essay on poetic theory entitled "The Poetic Principle." At the end of this essay is a long paragraph where Poe seems to have acquired or arrived at an entirely new poetic vision, and yet it is embedded in prose, a metaphor of shyness. One line after another demonstrates Poe's evolved observational skills, that he shaped to music, unlike any poetry he had written before. The question arises, therefore, as it may with all artists who die young, "What if?" Had he lived, would history have been kinder? Would we have seen the emergence of a new Poe, a poetry no longer burdened by antecedent conventional forms, the sonority, semantics, and shape that could outWhitman Whitman a decade before *Leaves of Grass*?

TOWARD CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP

Specific architectural properties of Roderick Usher's guitar, expounded in Chapter 3, provide perspective not previously recognized in Poe studies. The cycle of saturation and collapse helps explain this phenomenon and demonstrates its versatility not only as a governing dynamic of

poetry proper, particularly in more densely metered poems, but also of Poe's universe itself. This study offers suggestions on the nature of Poe's lean output of verse compared to his poems. Prose is where his genius appears liberated, while his verse suffers restraint by comparison. While the death of a beautiful woman has been a common trope of Poe scholarship, this study examines the derivative motifs throughout his poetic canon. The subtitle, "The Sublimity of Oneness in the Poetry of Edgar Poe," suggests Poe's principal poetic theme not only as it appears in a majority of his poems, but in many of his tales, as well as *Eureka*.

Chapter 1 —"The Mystery Which Binds Me Still": An Inventory of Verse

The most chilling word in the Poe imaginary, and perhaps the most maligned in Poe biography may be the word "poverty." An unforgiving word, it is rarely used without some cold hard modifier preceding it—abject, dire, desperate, unending, extreme, agonizing (all drawn from Poe biography). In "Some Secrets of the Magazine Prison House," Poe convincingly describes a young author "struggling with Despair itself in the shape of a ghastly poverty, which has no alleviation—no sympathy from an every-day world, that cannot understand his necessities, and that would pretend not to understand them if it comprehended them ever so well" (Mabbott 3.1208). Who would know better than Poe? He might say it is like being buried alive, and we know how he felt about that. It has long been a concession of Poe scholarship that a persistent and extreme lack of means had a ruinous effect on Poe's life. But what about his work? What print did necessity leave upon it? It was the age of the penny papers, when the literary trade "was increasingly dominated by weekly and monthly magazines, not books" (Kennedy and Peeples 480), an age that privileged the short form (tales, essays, criticism) over the long, forcing genre on Poe if he wished to survive. And the pay was lousy. The point is necessity (and fate) exerted influence over his work, of which this is but one example. Over time, as we will see, and as some have observed, necessity and obligation will gnaw at the sovereignty of Poe's poetic convictions, leaving its effects on his verse. So, while an understanding of this poverty of means is indispensable for a thorough understanding of Poe, striking at the central nerve of this study is a poverty of a slightly different stripe, one that is much easier to recognize and codify, defined in terms of "deficiency, dearth, scarcity, smallness of amount" ("Poverty," def. 2.5). This particular impoverishment seems to have affected Poe's verse in ways it did not affect his tales and other works of prose.

In a 1968 article in the *Sewanee Review*, poet, essayist, and critic Allen Tate observes, "I think it is fair to infer from all the evidence that he [Poe] had very little, or rather one thing to say in poetry" (218). "He is known as a poet," William Carlos Williams writes, "yet there are but five poems, possibly three" (245). Other poets and scholars of note have expressed the same or similar opinion—Jerome McGann, Daniel Hoffman, T. S. Eliot, and French symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire among them. Baudelaire, who prayed every morning "to God, to his father, to Marietta [his old servant], and to Edgar Poe as intercessors" (150), acknowledged how "slight" Poe's poetic output (57). "His poetry, condensed and studied, doubtless cost him much effort," Baudelaire adds, "and he needed money too often to devote himself to this pleasurable and unprofitable labor." W. H. Auden, in a similar vein, writes, "Without the leisure to write and rewrite he cannot develop to his full stature" (Carlson 224). Showing little mercy in his assessments and considering Poe's verse the result of "puerile thinking," a bewildered T. S. Eliot concedes that though Poe wrote "very few poems," a small number of them were "as well known to as large a number of people, are as well-remembered by everybody, as any poems ever written" (327). Killis Campbell acknowledges that not only is Poe's output of verse small, his range is narrow, "being confined, on the one hand, to the lyric, and, on the other, so far as his better poems are concerned, to a scant half dozen subjects" (lx). Under such weighty and consistent judgment, Hoffman asks the reasonable question, "What went wrong with Poe's passion for poetry? Why did he dry up and leave one of the teeniest bodies of verse of any poet the world has applauded for over a century?" (36)

Poe himself—bold, capable, and "with complete confidence in his own genius" (Kopley 1)—against a seemingly healthy artistic self-image, a certain carriage of southern gentility, and a hubris artists are often inclined to, however mild, not to mention being an ardent self-promoter,

published an introductory opinion of his own poetry that seems to dull the varnish. In the Preface of his 1845 publication of *The Raven and Other Poems,* Poe refers to the contents of the collection as "trifles," a list of poems, many of which are considered among his best—"The Raven," "The Sleeper," "Israfel," "The City in the Sea," "To One in Paradise," "The Conqueror Worm," "The Haunted Palace," "Tamerlane," "To Helen," and others. Candidly and yet apologetically he admits his anxieties if not his regrets, easily detected as both are in the tone of this preface.

> In defence [sic] of my own taste, nevertheless, it is incumbent upon me to say, that I think nothing in this volume of much value to the public, or very creditable to myself. Events not to be controlled have prevented me from making, at any time, any serious effort in what, under happier circumstances, would have been the field of my choice." (qtd. in Thompson 675)

In her review of *The Raven and Other Poems* in the *New York Daily Tribune* 26 November 1845, Margaret Fuller, in response to the above passage, writes that "Such things should never be said unless in hearty earnest. If in earnest, they are honorable pledges; if not, a pitiful fence and foil of vanity. Earnest or not, the words are thus far true: the productions in this volume indicate a power to do something far better" (Fuller). The tenor of this preface had changed very little from the one written eighteen years earlier introducing *Tamerlane and Other Poems. By a Bostonian* [1827]:

> The greater part of the Poems which compose this little volume, were written in the year 1821-2, when the author had not completed his fourteenth year. They were of course not intended for publication; why they are now published concerns no one but himself. Of the smaller pieces very little need be said: they perhaps savour too much of Egotism; but they were written by one too young to have any knowledge of the world but from his own breast. (Mabbot 1.21-2)

By writing in the third person, Poe created distance, or the illusion of distance, from ownership, allowing him to excuse a work in a voice other than his own. An apologetic to his youth, the last sentence deftly plagiarizes Montjoy's address to Henry V voicing the Dauphin's scorn: ". . . the

prince, our master, says you savour too much of your youth" (H5 1.2.249-50), the equivocation masterful. It is easy to forget, at least in his earlier volumes, that this is not yet the mature, artistically seasoned Poe of our usual pursuits. Genius, however, is neither sleeping nor idle; it is rather in process—feral, insatiate, discovering itself, testing its range of perception, purging music out of life's hard stare, and clearing its throat, so to speak, finding its voice. As Ralph Waldo Emerson would write to Walt Whitman in 1855 upon the release of *Leaves of Grass*, on the startling brilliance he detected within that collection and its grownup stature, it appears Poe too "must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start" (qtd. in Whitman 1326). The younger Poe continues:

> In Tamerlane, he has endeavoured to expose the folly of even risking the best feelings of the heart at the shrine of Ambition. He is conscious that in this there are many faults, (besides that of the general character of the poem) which he flatters himself he could, with little trouble, have corrected, but unlike many of his predecessors, has been too fond of his early productions to amend them in his old age. (Mabbott 1.22)

This paragraph and the remainder of the preface reveal just how far out front Poe's perception or idolization of poetry is at this stage of his life, how intense its weight or gravity, his influences not yet dismissed. If Byron woke up one morning to discover he was famous, Poe woke up one morning thinking he was Byron. The point is the young poet is still behind it, *it* being poetry proper, the great monolith he must negotiate around or through, the Sphinx that worries him for the right questions. In some sense, poetry is always out front; the poet strives for her favor, her glorious nod, and that is as it should be and most often is.

Like Tate, Eliot, Hoffman, Wilbur, and others, there is no dearth of poets who talk shop, who write exhaustively about the craft, who continuously feed upon it, writing and rewriting to penetrate its secrets, to gaze into its heart if it has one. In the introduction to Paul Valéry's *The Art of Poetry*, T. S. Eliot writes that "Valéry is not primarily interested in teaching his readers

anything. He is perpetually engaged in solving an insoluble puzzle—the puzzle of how poetry gets written" (xi). The same may be said of Poe's direct literary forebears, the second-generation Romantics, poetry being the fever it was to each of them—Byron, Shelley, and Keats—who worked out their salvation with endless investigation and discourse, not to mention that much of their poetry was about poetry, sometimes overt, most often invisible. Of Keats particularly, Poe writes, "Of poets who have appeared most fully instinct with the principles now developed, we may mention Keats as the most remarkable. He is the sole British poet who has never erred in his themes. Beauty is always with him" ("Review of Ballads" 248). This is a remarkable endorsement, if not a kind of confession. "With a great poet," Keats writes to his brothers, "the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" (*Selected Letters* 42).

Over the span of his career, with such a mind as he had, whose province was, like Keats, all beauty, it is not unfair to admit, if curiously we must, that Poe seems to have written as much or more about the craft than he engaged in the craft itself, though poetry is his holy ground, his way in, around, and only sometimes through the inward turbulence, the closest thing he had to religion or prayer. Poetry is where he gathers with his beloved departed, where he loves and seeks love. His truer poverties are best distinguished in his verse. In response to poetry proper and the poet's proximity to it, as the poet seasons, he learns to cooperate *with* the poem, particularly given its mystical qualities and its part in the continuing sophistication of his ear, ever instructing him, as only the poem can, how to listen. For there are, after all, harmonics of profound delicacy to be realized when all is right, when poetry proper is neither behind nor too far out front, but adjacent, within reach. Either way, whether the above prefaces reflect genteel manners of the times, a bid for sympathy as often detected among Poe's letters, a sincerity of

modesty, or a myriad of intentions beyond the scope of this investigation, whatever his reasons, public or not, it is evident that Poe suffered some career-long argument with his poetry, even as he did with life itself.

Poe's tales, however, his marginalia, his many articles and essays reflect gargantuan output, copious and refined, and with his usual hard polish. This disparity presents an odd paradox in the oeuvre of a poet recognized for genius, or, indeed, recognized first as a poet. It may be argued, if by appearances, that Poe's exercise of genius suffers little or no restraint in his prose. And yet there is not only crippling restraint where his poetry is concerned, a large swath of his verse is also bound to a single, compressed, and demonstrable theme, identifiable by a set of consistent and homogenous elements held together by a kind of thematic unity. To employ a musical term, these motifs may be thought of loosely as variations on a theme, defined as an initial statement (theme) followed by a succession of recognizable divisions of that theme transformed by significant alterations that introduce new expressions (echoes) of the original. These variations are distinguished by harmonic sympathies, consistencies of voice, tone, and shade, differentiated at times by what amounts to a mere costume change, a retelling, a reimagining of a setting, a situation, mood, or condition, all of which reflect a homogeneity of theme shared by these poems. A concept from *Eureka* may help explain: "The assumption of absolute Unity in the primordial Particle includes that of infinite divisibility" (23). This "infinite divisibility" is essentially "variations on a theme" by other means. Hamlet, with a poet-prince-scholar's grasp of the concept, says, "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space" (*Ham.* 2.2.254-255), suggesting roughly that within a single theme lie infinite possibilities—variations, combinations, permutations—a challenge Poe seems to have met with constraint. But what is Poe's "one thing" to say?

THE MOST SECRET CHAMBER OF THE HEART

In “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe, in a Dupin-like dialog with himself, posing a series of questions to satisfy his quest for that which is most pleasurable in a poem, starts with two foundational premises: that “Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem” (678), and “That pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure, is, I believe, found in the contemplation of the beautiful.” Asking next, what would be “the *tone* of its highest manifestation,” he answers that “all experience has shown that this tone is one of sadness. Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones.” He then asks, “‘Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the *universal* understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?’ Death—was the obvious reply. ‘And when’ I said, ‘is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?’” (679-80) After some deliberation, he asserts that the most melancholy topic, death, is most poetical when it “closely allies itself to *Beauty*” (680). His conclusion? “The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.” This is where our inquiry starts, with the *death of a beautiful woman,* the principal motif of this study, the one Poe returns to again and again. In “The Poetic Principle” [1849] his final lecture turned essay, published the year after his death, he writes that “Love—the true, the divine Eros—the Uranian, as distinguished from the Dionæan Venus—is unquestionably the purest and truest of all poetical themes” (*Collected Tales* 906). Love, therefore, or union, sublime oneness, is first in a triptych, that is, in a confluence of three things which provide the theme upon which all derivative motifs in this study originate and are founded—*love, death, and beauty*.

The death of a beautiful woman, and the love that enshrines and gives it meaning, is a thread long woven into the cloth of western literature, the most immediate examples being perhaps Petrarch's *Canzionere* and Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Though the first English translation of Dante's *Vita Nuova* was not available in America until 1846, it is likely that Poe read it; the empathies that exist between it and "Annabel Lee" are too convincing otherwise. McGann cites three poems (designated here by their first lines) from *Vita Nuova* as probable sources of "Annabel Lee"—"Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore" [Ladies that have intelligence in Love], "Donna pietosa e di novella etate" [A very pitiful lady, very young] and "Gli occhi dolenti per pietà del core" [The eyes that weep for pity of the heart] (188). "That 'Annabel Lee' is referencing these poems," he adds, "is beyond question, though, remarkable to say, it has not been pointed out before." Having reviewed Barthold Georg Niebuhr's "Essay on the Allegory in the First Canto of Dante" confirms Poe's familiarity with *The Divine Comedy*. In *Vita Nuova*, Dante, upon his first encounter with Beatrice, and wanting "to write of her that which has never been written of any other woman" (Musa 84), declares:

> At that moment, and what I say is true, the vital spirit, the one that dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so violently that even the least pulses of my body were strangely affected; and trembling, it spoke these words: "Here is a god stronger than I, who shall come to rule over me." (4)

The intensity of emotion in this passage and the character of expression is echoed by Sarah Helen Whitman after Poe's death in retelling what he had written to her in a letter about Jane Stanard:

> This lady, on entering the room, took his hand and spoke some gentle and gracious words of welcome, which so penetrated the sensitive heart of the boy as to deprive him of the power of speech, and, for a time, almost of consciousness itself. He returned home in a dream, with but one thought, one hope in life—to hear again the sweet and gracious words that had made the desolate world so beautiful to him, and filled his lonely heart with the oppression of a new joy. (61-62)

Note that at the time Poe fell in love with Mrs. Stanard he was fourteen. He had been friends with her son, Robert. When things were not going well at home, which was often, "he went to her for sympathy, and she always consoled and comforted him" (Miller 42). Like Dante, it was a love Poe never seemed to shake, that wounded him into verse, haunting, as it did, many of his poems, both early and late. There is consensus that by gradual transfiguration, a theosis of a kind, Jane Stanard became the fixed image of the ideal, his true Helen. And if we are to believe Dante, youth is no barrier to enchantment of this magnitude if but for the innocence it is printed on. He was nine years old when he first met and was enraptured by the nine-year-old Beatrice.

A SMACK OF AMBROSIA

To begin an inventory of the motifs, preeminent among them is *the death of a beautiful woman*, which implies, as well, *loss or absence*—"Tamerlane," "To Helen," "The Raven," "The Sleeper," "Ulalume," "Annabel Lee," and others. Because this death asks the impossible of language, the burden of expression is upon him for whom words are most difficult, if he has them. It is the task of the bereaved to discover the language suitable for expressing the loss. Therefore, to the proposition that "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world," Poe adds ". . . equally is it beyond doubt that the *lips best suited for such a topic are those of a bereaved lover* [italics mine]" ("Philosophy of Composition" 680). According to Poe, it is the bereaved lover who best actualizes the voice of loss in its truest, and most delicate, most invisible, that is, most poetic shapes, set to Poe's delightfully minor key, his tone of choice. The following are the last lines of the poem cited above by McGann from Dante's *Vita Nuova*—"Donna pietosa e di novella etate" [A very pitiful lady, very young], a classic example of "the lips best suited."

> So humbly in my grief I then beheld
> what humble sweetness took its shape in her
> that I said: “Death I hold you very dear;
> by now you ought to be a gracious thing
> and should have changed your scorn for sympathy,
> since my lady you have been at home.
> I yearn so to become one of your own
> that I resemble you in every way.
> My heart begs you to come.”
> When the last rites were done, I left that place,
> and when I was alone
> and looking toward high heaven, I exclaimed:
> “Blessed is he who sees you, lovely soul!”
> Just then you called me and thank God you did. (Musa 50)

A note of interest, considering how often Poe appears to be confessed in his poetry, as a critic he “saw biography as a possible key to literature” (Kopley 2). On reviewing Niebuhr’s essay, Poe writes that “everything must be explained by his [Dante’s] life, and the peculiarities connected therewith.” Poe’s biographical approach to criticism is confirmed in “The Literati of New York City, IV”, where, in his text on Margaret Fuller, he writes “The supposition that the book of an author is a thing apart from the author’s self, is, I think, ill-founded” (*Godey’s* 74).

> The soul is a cypher, in the sense of a cryptograph; and the shorter a cryptograph is, the more difficulty there is in its comprehension — at a certain point of brevity it would bid defiance to an army of Champollions [a decipherer]. And thus he who has written very little, may in that little either conceal his spirit or convey quite an erroneous idea of it — of his acquirements, talents, temper, manner, tenor and depth (or shallowness) of thought — in a word, of his character, of himself. But this is impossible with him who has written much. Of such a person we get, from his books, not merely a just, but the most just representation.

Closely aligned with the death of the beloved and the language suitable to speak of and for the death of the beloved, is *the soul’s enshrinement of woman*. This motif also implies a sacrality, a kind of salvation by way of the enshrined, which, as mentioned above, begs language that satisfies this sacrality, an elevated tongue, one that reaches or attempts to reach beyond the natural to the supernatural (supernal), the abode of the departed, fashioned out of a profound

longing for the infinite. This condition of Poe's verse is demonstrated even among his earliest poems, those written not long after the death of Jane Stanard, the most representative perhaps being "To Helen," from the 1831 collection titled *Poems by Edgar Allan Poe,* a poem written when Poe was fourteen, the year before Mrs. Stanard died. To the poet, this "Helen" is very much alive, proclaiming, as he is, the ideality—bright, statue-like, worthy of a sacred niche, a meditation of worship, tuned to a harp. Years later, in 1848, Poe's wife having died in 1847, in a long letter to Sarah Helen Whitman convincing her of his devotion to her, Poe mentions stumbling on one of his earlier poems, ". . . lines I had written in my passionate boyhood, to the first, purely ideal love of my soul — to the Helen Stannard [sic] of whom I told you" (*Letters* 2.385). Here, after so long an association, a token of his ideality, he refers to Jane as "the Helen." In a warm ooze of persuasion, he attempts to convince Sarah Helen Whitman that *she* is now the Helen. "I saw that you were my *Helen — my* Helen — the Helen of a thousand dreams — she whose visionary lips had so often lingered on my own in the divine trance of passion" (2.387). The billet-doux is another genre Poe seems to have mastered. Hoffman notes, "Helen's apotheosis is completed by stanza 3, where she stands like a statue in a 'brilliant window-niche—like the statue of a saint" (64). The following is Mabbott's [F] version of "To Helen."

> Helen, thy beauty is to me
> Like those Nicéan barks of yore,
> That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
> The weary way-worn wanderer bore
> To his own native shore.
>
> On desperate seas long wont to roam,
> Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
> Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
> To the glory that was Greece,
> And the grandeur that was Rome.
>
> Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
> How statue-like I see thee stand,

> The agate lamp within thy hand!
> Ah, Psyche from the regions which
> Are Holy land! (1.166)

With a few minor variants, evolutionary states of this poem did not see much radical change, the major revision being lines 9-10 from the original published version "To the beauty of fair Greece, / And the grandeur of old Rome," [A] to its final version, the much talked about, sonically majestic "To the glory that was Greece, / And the grandeur that was Rome" [F].

Immediately following the death of Poe, James Russell Lowell wrote the following concerning his earlier poems. "Mr. Poe's early productions show that he could see through the verse to the spirit beneath. . . . We call them the most remarkable boyish poems that we have ever read" (Fish 86). Of "To Helen," Russell adds, "the grace and symmetry of the outline are such as few poets ever attain. There is a smack of ambrosia about it." "To Helen," Kopley writes, "though not yet perfected, is already, in its initial version, a beautiful hymn to one's spiritual home" (122), a sentiment that reaches back to Poe's earliest poems, most notably "A Dream," from *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. "That holy dream – that holy dream, / While all the world were chiding" (Mabbott 1.79). Applauded by scholars for its classicality, "To Helen" reflects Poe's admiration for Keats, or at least the shared centrality of beauty in the poetic theory of Keats both in image and sonic likeness. "O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede / Of marble men and maidens overwrought, / With forest branches and the trodden weed; / Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought" from "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (*Complete Poetry*, lines 41-44). The first stanza of "To Helen" is reminiscent of Shakespeare's sonnet 116: "Oh no, it is an ever fixed mark / That looks on tempests and is never shaken; / It is the star to every wand'ring bark, / Whose worth's unknown although his highth be taken" (5-8). Though her name will change in

those Helens yet to come—Eliza, Elmira, Jane, Sarah, Annie, Frances, Virginia—the perennial *She* will maintain the "window niche" until it is exchanged for a "sepulcher there by the sea."

> Poe's love for his wife was a sort of rapturous worship of the spirit of beauty which he felt was fading before his eyes. I have seen him hovering around her when she was ill, with all the fond and tender anxiety of a mother for her first-born—her slightest cough causing in him a shudder. (Graham 225)

As mentioned, and as demonstrated in "To Helen," the poem proper is holy ground for Poe, particularly those poems that feature his "Helen" in one form or another, the poem being a province of beauty—Edenic, elevated, outside the reach of the infernal, where the demonic has neither authority nor welcome. Hoffman writes, "Edgar Poe's Helen is also Homer's Helen, the Helen of the ages, Perfect Beauty" (64).

A DEMON IN MY VIEW

With the exception perhaps of "The Raven," a single mention in "Alone," and possible influence in "Ulalume," there is *an absence or muting of the demonic* in Poe's verse, especially when compared to his tales. Where it has free exercise of influence in his prose, the demonic is restrained in his verse. On the other hand, if the demonic is restrained or mute in his verse, angelic presence often is not. There are angelic presences in the Poe poem, and not all of them behave angelically. In "Annabel Lee," the love between the narrator and his beloved is *foiled by jealous angels*, which may be added to this inventory of motifs. "With a love the wingéd seraphs of Heaven / Coveted her and me" (Mabbott 1.477), and "The angels not half so happy in heaven / Went envying her and me—" (1.478). According to McGann, this envy had nothing to do with Annabel Lee being, like Beatrice, made of such a pure, pious, and beatific stuff that heaven had to have her for itself. This covetousness is due to the "love that was more than love," which is human love, "but somehow made more perfect than it often appears" (192). Presenting a kind of

First Commandment challenge to the love of God (the love above all loves), such love comes with a price. “For catastrophe is the price that Eternity sets for ‘the love that is more than love.’”

> In dismantling the traditional myth of Beatrice, then, Poe is in effect re-interpreting the myth of the Fall. In Poe’s story, if there is an Original Sin it is committed by transmortal beings, including God himself, who introduce Death into the lovers’ world out of “envy” for an unimaginable love. (194)

This holiness associated with Poe’s verse helps explain, in part, the restraint he exercises or is exercised upon him in those poems, the death of a woman being his oldest and perhaps deepest emotional and psychological stronghold, requiring the highest expenditure of poetic energies and investments (as Baudelaire suggested). It is an unfortunate point of biography, the kind that suffuses into one’s art, that as a young man and on too many occasions when Poe loved a woman, be it romantic, maternal, or some amalgam of both, she would die an ill-timed death (Eliza Poe, Frances Allan, Jane Stanard, Virginia Poe), or be kept from him by the cruel intervention of another (Elmira Royster). The saddest, most telling, and one of the more naked lines in the canon is from one of Poe’s most quotable poems, written when he was around twenty—“And all I lov’d – I lov’d alone,” a statement that may be interpreted as one who loves in tragic absence of the other. The following are the first few lines of “Alone” [A].

> From childhood’s hour I have not been
> As others were – I have not seen
> As others saw – I could not bring
> My passions from a common spring –
> From the same source I have not taken
> My sorrow – I could not awaken
> My heart to joy at the same tone –
> And all I lov’d – I lov’d alone – (Mabbott 1.146)

Mentioned above, one of the curiosities of Poe's craft is the differential between the output of Poe's prose against that of his verse. Hoffman writes that "Poe is a great love poet. *In his prose*. But it is so" (229) [italics mine]. Prose is where he plays, where Poe enjoys the free exercise of his genius. He admits as much. Confessed as he often is in his works, reviewing Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* for *Graham's Magazine*, May 1842, in an exercise of discreet self-flattery, Poe writes:

> The tale proper, in our opinion, affords unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent, which can be afforded by the wide domains of mere prose. Were we bidden to say how the highest genius could be most advantageously employed for the best display of its own powers, we should answer, without hesitation—in the composition of a rhymed poem, not to exceed in length what might be perused in an hour. (Thompson 646)

While reserving the "highest genius" for verse suggests piety, there is nonetheless a noticeable hesitation, an inexplicable if not baffling tentativeness not detectable in his prose, which helps explain, in part, the leanness of his poetic output. This is not a denunciation, yet when one reads the exquisitely tuned "The Island of the Fay," "Eleonora," or the charmed penultimate paragraph at the close of "The Poetic Principle," then compares them to much of Poe's published works of poetry (with exceptions, of course), it cannot help but raise questions, that, historically, I am not alone in asking.

"The Island of the Fay" offers an example of what Poe is capable of poetically, though the lines are embedded in prose, lines of astute observation and articulation. The following passage is a reflection not on a woman but on nature, and while poetic ornamentation including flora, tone, even movement occasionally work into his tales, Poe is not obligated to form or convention the way he is with his verse. The result is a poetic voice of a different, more liberated character, capable of achieving his ultimate objective for the poetic—the excitement of the soul. Though Poe wrote the following as part of a single paragraph, for the purpose of demonstration I

have broken the lines to affect a more conventional formatting of verse. Note the parallel constructions that add a biblical weight and sonority to the lines—incantatory, litanic—not unlike the familiar passage in Ecclesiastes: “A time to be born, and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which has been planted, a time to kill and a time to heal . . .” (*King James Version,* Ecc. 3:1-3) And remember, the following was published as one long paragraph.

> I love, indeed, to regard the dark valleys,
> and the grey rocks,
> and the waters that silently smile,
> and the forests that sigh in uneasy slumbers,
> and the proud watchful mountains that look down upon all—
> I love to regard these as themselves
> but the colossal members of one vast animate and sentient whole—
> a whole whose form (that of the sphere) is the most perfect
> and most inclusive of all;
> whose path is among associate planets;
> whose meek handmaiden is the moon,
> whose mediate sovereign is the sun;
> whose life is eternity;
> whose thought is that of a God. (Mabbott 2.600)

Though his Wordsworth appears to be showing, the above lines were not written or imagined as poetry proper. Even so, the lines are beautiful and achieve the pleasurable effect whether constructed as poetry or prose. Elsewhere in “The Island of the Fay,” “The latter was all one radiant harem of garden beauties. It glowed and blushed beneath the eye of the slant sunlight, and fairly laughed with flowers” (2.603).

Returning to the motifs, the natural correlative that attends the death of a beautiful woman is the *desire of the bereaved to be with his beloved*. “And neither the angels in Heaven above, / Nor the demons down under the sea, / Can ever dissever my soul from the soul / Of the beautiful Annabel Lee (1.478). The tragic Greek tale of Orpheus is based on the death of a beautiful woman (Eurydice), his journey to the underworld to bring her back, and the melodic enchantments of his grief-stricken appeal to Hades and Persephone. “The blend of lyre and word

/ Made bloodless ghosts fall weeping as they heard. / . . . Then the furies wept: their cheeks that hour / Were wet, they say, with tears through music's power" (Ovid 218). Not unlike Dante in his own works, or Poe in his, the lyre of Orpheus and the song he sang was executed with such a bewitching godlike fusion of beauty and sorrow, it had the power to humble the heart of beasts, to make rocks cry and gods weep, and moved the prince of the underworld to grant him favor, a favor that did not last, none of which was lost on Poe.

STAR-CROSS'D

With the death of a beloved and the desire of the bereaved to be with his beloved, is the more oppressive presence of *impossibility*, *the impossibility of being with the departed, the impossibility of a true and complete happiness*, *of sustaining a paradise one had or might have had, of desiring but not having, the impossibilities that death imposes on life as it was once known*. This strength of this motif is found in Poe's notion of "the thirst unquenchable," that McGann refers to as "the poetic presentation of an unattainable object" (72) which is "Poe's limit condition for all poetry." The poetic principle itself is defined as "the Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty," what Poe considers an instinctual striving, a thirst, aboriginal, "deep within the spirit of man" (*Collected Tales* 893).

> This thirst belongs to the immortality of Man. It is at once a consequence and an indication of his perennial existence. It is the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us—but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above. Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle, by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time, to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone. (894)

This motif (impossibility) is the "Nevermore" so terrifyingly vocal in "The Raven," and yet spectral, phantomlike in other poems, a profound loneliness that deepens the melody but robs the one remaining behind of their speech, or worse, their hope. McGann refers to this element of

Poe's verse as "the catastrophe of beauty," essentially its ephemerality. That " a thing of beauty — *this* thing of beauty — is not and never can be a 'joy forever.' This is the ultimate meaning of Poe's mortally immortal word 'Nevermore' as well as a sign of the world's pitiless benevolence" (94). Impossibility becomes a thing of horror.

> "Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil! —prophet still, if bird or devil! —
> By that heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
> Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
> It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
> Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore."
> Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore." (Mabbott 1.368)

The magnitude of the "love that was more than love" is of such a perilous weight the lover becomes poised to eventually fall beneath it, a state that gives it its "star-cross'd" quality, composing, as it has power to do, the high music of pathos. This love is exceptional "not merely because it is doomed to loss and death, but because it embraces that unredeemable condition" (McGann 194). This notion of impossibility may be best understood as being present in the undercurrent of a poem, the undercurrent being a reserve for the subtleties, for suggestion and indefinitiveness (a word Poe invented), for the voiceless conspiracies of poetry, the spectral overhearing, that which you only think you heard—impossibility being, as it is, the most invisible and perhaps most seductive of all motifs. "Poetry's mortal music," McGann writes, that which is audible, "runs the 'upper current' of meaning that allows us to glimpse an undercurrent of more capacious meanings, though all the meanings will fall short of the encompassing harmony that the poetry desires to reach" (180).

The death of a loved one creates a tension between the impossible and the irresistible, between what once was and should be, and what is no more and can never be. Turning again to Keats, having nursed both his mother (when he was fourteen) and his youngest brother (years later) through their illness and subsequent deaths of tuberculosis, he was well acquainted with

the disease and its horrific effects. Because of that, and because of his medical training, he recognized the signs when he contracted the disease himself following his brother's death in December 1818. In the first few months of 1819, not only did Keats have the dread disease but by that time he was, as he might say it, full in love with Fanny Brawne. In short time, Keats found himself bound between the impossible and the irresistible, in the liminal space between what he wanted and what he knew he could never have. Yet, in the press, in the tension between the two states, between Eros and Thanatos, Keats composed his finest, most memorable work. 1819 was his *annus mirabilis*, his miracle year. In July of that year, he wrote the following words to Fanny Brawne: "I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O, that I could have possession of them in the same minute" (*Selected Letters* 253). "Ode to a Nightingale," a poem he wrote in a single morning in May, is a song of loss and absence, a pæan to love and death, of what the creature does not have and cries for. Keats made a masterpiece of it, crafting one of the quietest, most tranquil lines in all of English literature: "To cease upon the midnight with no pain" (*Complete Poetry* 292). More quietly confessed in such a grand line is the contemplation of his own end. This ode was but the second in a series of the five great odes he wrote in a period of three and a half weeks that spring.

Strange and perhaps unlikely as a muse, impossibility, in this sense, is a boon to the superbly cultivated, that is, to the poet's ear—calamity's profound effects on genius. Those same effects worked on Poe, and with similar results. A line from Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes" captures a Poe-like tone: "The music, yearning like a god in pain" (256). Consider the fallen resolve of this first stanza of Poe's "A Dream Within a Dream," a poem Kopley considers "an earnest lament about evanescence. (427).

> Take this kiss upon the brow!
> And, in parting from you now,

Thus much let me avow –
You are not wrong, who deem
That my days have been a dream;
Yet if hope has flown away
In a night, or in a day,
In a vision, or in none,
Is it therefore the less *gone*?
All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream. [D] (Mabbott 1.451-2)

Hope, however it flees, it flees. Though it be framed in flora and pathos is it any less gone? For Poe, it was a sequence of such events, ever affirming his sense of dreaming-ness, drawing sadness out of it like nectar. Silverman captures this sentiment with some precision, writing that this poem "quietly dramatizes his [Poe's] furious bewilderment in helplessly watching the little that he holds precious sift away" (402). In his *Marginalia* of June 1849, Poe wrote, "It is by no means an irrational fancy that, in a future existence, we shall look upon what we think our present existence, as a dream" (*Complete Works* 161). In the second stanza are some of the more transparent lines in Poe. Grains of sand slip through his fingers while he weeps and there is nothing he can do to alter nature, to halt the downward pull of gravity, both literal and figurative.

I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of the golden sand —
How few! yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep — while I weep!
O, God! can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
O, God! can I not save
One from the pitiless wave?
Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream? (Mabbott 1.452)

The death of a beautiful woman, the voice of the bereaved, the elevations in the language of sorrow, the sacrality, the desire to be with the beloved, the impossibility, collectively imply a *lost paradise* with its phantoms of fond memory, of long love, the relentless-sweet melancholy of reminiscence, its "mournful and never-ending remembrance" (Thompson 684). There is perhaps no better image of a lost paradise than that demonstrated in the short story "Eleanora." Published in 1842, the year Virginia showed the first signs of the disease that would eventually take her life, this tale is an idyll of bliss and animation, ecstasies of color, of beauteous wild yet somehow manicured nature, a private Eden between two youths in love, rapt in a sublimity of oneness. They are first cousins, she the child of his aunt, the sister of his long dead mother. Their Eden was in "the Valley of the Many-Coloured Grass. No unguided footstep ever came upon that vale" (Mabbott 2.639), it was theirs alone—undiscovered, virginal, a land bordering a deep nature-enchanted river, the River of Silence, narrow and deep, "brighter than all save the eyes of Eleanora."

> . . . the mountains that girdled it in, were carpeted all by soft green grass, thick, short, perfectly even, vanilla-perfumed, but so besprinkled throughout with the yellow buttercup, the white daisy, the purple violet, and the ruby-red asphodel, that its exceeding beauty spoke to our hearts in loud tones, of the love and the glory of god. (2.650)

Conspicuously autobiographical, it becomes difficult at times *not* to think of Virginia Poe when reading "Eleanora," her presence approaching a kind of benign metempsychosis of the type one observes in "Ligeia," without the malignancy, of course—a kind of counter, anti-Ligeia, a unique experiment in revision. "Eleanora was the name of my cousin," whose loveliness "was that of the seraphim, but she was a maiden artless and innocent as the brief life she had led among the flowers" (2.641). For beauty is too much the province of this tale, love and death, and the motifs that follow—the lost paradise, the sacrality and enshrinement, the voice of the bereaved in the latter half of the tale, the impossibility. In an earlier [A] version of "Eleonora" the narrator says

that “the lilies of the valley are not more fair” (Quinn 329). Thematically consistent, “she had been made perfect in loveliness only to die” (642). Quinn refers to “Eleanor” as the “idealized, the spiritualized version of the theme of spiritual integrity, made concrete by its association with the death of a beautiful woman” (329). At her passing, as the “Years dragged themselves along heavily” (651), the narrator dwelt alone in the Valley of the Many-Coloured Grass. All things began to fall into decline. “The star-shaped flowers shrank into the stems of the trees, and appeared no more. The tints of the green carpet [grass] faded; and, one by one, the ruby-red asphodels withered away.” In spite of its happy ending, this tale demonstrates one of the more potent of all themes in Poe, detectable from his first attempts at verse. All of the motifs could roughly be reduced to this single comprehensive notion of a lost paradise, paradise itself the image of a sublime oneness.

“The Assignation,” a dark little Venetian tale of forbidden love, beauty, heroism, impossibility, loss, sacrifice, and a rendezvous with death, features the poem “To One in Paradise,” which is, in essence, the wealthy stranger’s suicide note, tearfully composed in his own hand. “Ah, dream too bright to last! / Ah, starry Hope! that didst arise / But to be overcast! . . . For alas! alas! with me / The light of Life is o’er!” (Mabbott 2.162). Against the impossibility of ever enjoying a paradise of their own, “one hour after sunrise” the marchesa Aphrodite and the wealthy stranger take their own lives. By the end of the tale, the narrator is in the lavishly furnished chambers of the heroic stranger and is shown a portrait of the beautiful marchesa, the stranger’s paramour. So vividly and painstakingly lifelike, he beholds “her superhuman beauty,” as if she were standing before him. He then notices that in the expression of her countenance, “which was beaming all over with smiles, there still lurked (incomprehensible anomaly!) that fitful stain of melancholy which will ever be found inseparable from the perfection of the

beautiful" (2.164). Word-drunk and "theory-mad," Poe cannot help himself, nor can the evangelist in him not impose his poetic theory whenever and wherever opportunity and impulse allow. The essence of this line is an indication of Poe's holy grail, that which he seeks and hopes to achieve most in a poem, what he refers to in "The Poetic Principle" as an impression of "pleasurable sadness" (*Collected Tales* 898), the character of beauty he desires most to transpose into verse. "This certain taint of sadness is inseparably connected with all the higher manifestations of true Beauty. It is, nevertheless, [quoting Longfellow's 'The Waif'] 'A feeling of sadness and longing / That is not akin to pain, / And resembles sorrow only / As the mist resembles the rain.'" In "The Island of the Fay," having written on the natural glories of the western island, "The other or eastern end of the isle was whelmed in the blackest shade. A sombre, yet beautiful and peaceful gloom pervaded all things" (Mabbott 2.603). This is one of Poe's staple tones—beauty, gloom, and serenity, the pleasurable sadness one experiences in "Annabel Lee" or "The Sleeper."

A REALM SOMEWHERE ELSE

> And all my days are trances,
> And all my nightly dreams
> Are where thy grey eye glances,
> And where thy footstep gleams –
> In what ethereal dances,
> By what ethereal streams. (Mabbott 1.215)

In this last stanza of "To One In Paradise," as in many of the poems there is a *somnambulance, variable dream states* within which a poem is imagined, composed, and best understood, a state associated with the supernal, the ethereal. Poet and critic Richard Wilbur looks at this state as Poe's "fundamental plot, the effort of the poetic soul to escape all consciousness of the world in dream" (Carlson 259). It appears that Poe considered dreams much

more interesting and offered more possibilities than real life. It is not unreasonable to suggest that Poe did not feel himself a part of this world, that he was an outsider, and from a very young age, that the world moved and hummed about him, that while its conversation included him on occasion, he was equipped by nurture to stand aloof from it, branded a stranger, as he was, orphaned, chronically detached, ever on the outside. Framing this as Poe's battle with the world, Wilbur asks, "How does one wage war against the external world?" The answer? Sleep.

> When we withdraw our attention from the world in somnolence or sleep, the world ceases to be. As our minds move toward sleep, by way of drowsiness and reverie and the hypnagogic state, we escape from consciousness of the world. . . . we enter a realm in which reason no longer hampers the play of the imagination: we enter the realm of dream. (Carlson 259)

Poet Galway Kinnell, in a 1988 documentary on Walt Whitman, asserts that most of the nineteenth-century poets were blind. "Poe, you could say, was absolutely blind. You would not know that Poe lived in New York, walked down the same streets among the same sites that Whitman did. Poe's poetry was that of a blind man, a man who was imagining a realm somewhere else" (*Voices and Visions* "Walt Whitman"). I have no argument with Kinnell's assessment, but it should be noted that Poe's blindness, long cultivated in him, is of a peculiar, isolated, and idiosyncratic nature, that which makes Poe Poe.

There is another way of understanding Poe's gravitation toward the altered state. A further treatment of this common motif is offered in Chapter 4 through a discussion of "Ulalume," one of Poe's latter poems that takes place in a dreaming (hypnagogic) or altered state. "Ulalume," more than any of Poe's poems is overtly liquid, a state found most particularly in musical and densely metered poems. By liquid is meant a floating, a weightlessness, serenity by virtue of a lack of gravity, a fluidity of movement best detected when performed. Starting with Poe's earliest published works, the next chapter will dismantle select poems, paying notice

the motifs inventoried above, including the mechanics, the physics and metaphysics, and sonic characteristics.

Chapter 2 — Flashes of true Fire: From “Tamerlane” to “Tamerlane”

In the preface to *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. *By a Bostonian*, Poe writes, “The greater part of the Poems which compose this little volume, were written in the year 1821-2, when the author had not completed his fourteenth year” (Mabbott 1.21). Whether or not this is, as Mabbott suggests, a “statement of doubtful accuracy,” Poe nonetheless wrote these poems while still a very young poet. An early bloom of genius notwithstanding, some historical context may suggest possible reasons for such an early start, the one given the most attention being the Byronic influence. *Tamerlane and Other Poems* “was heavily indebted to the poetry of George Gordon, Lord Byron, whom Poe slavishly idolized in his youth” (Kennedy and Peeples 27). “My Ada,” the beloved in “Tamerlane,” is not only the middle name Byron’s daughter, but also the name of a character in both *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Cain: A Mystery*. “One noon of a bright summer's day / I pass'd from out the matted bow’r / Where in a deep, still slumber lay / My Ada. In that peaceful hour” (Mabbott 1.35-36). This influence, though formidable, was short-lived. In a letter to John Allan 29 May 1829, Poe, asking for help, writes at its close, “. . . I have long given up Byron as a model—for which, I think, I deserve some credit” (*Letters* 1.20). It was Poe’s way of softening Allan’s primary objection to his poetry. Even so, the influence diminished more by slow fade than an end stop. Most poets are introduced to the craft by way of inspiration in some form, though in time, if they are to survive or achieve a name, they abandon these influences to discover their own modes of expression, their own poetic identities beyond the aggravation and anxieties of influence, until becoming acquainted with what Harold Bloom refers to as “the poet within the poet, or the aboriginal poetic self” (*Anxiety of Influence* 11). In Poe’s case, this awareness, or the path to it, was, in some sense, forced upon him.

On 19 January 1821, the year he claims authorship of many of the poems in this first collection, he had only been back from England five months, after a five-year stay. On 22 June 1815, six-year-old "Ned" Poe set out from Norfolk on the *Lothair* with John and Francis Allan, and Ann Valentine, "Aunt Nancy," Mrs. Allan's sister, on a voyage of "several [five] wretched weeks at sea" (Kennedy 84). After landing at Liverpool, they spent time in Scotland, after which Edgar was sent to two boarding schools in England, first with the sisters Dubourg on Sloane Street in Chelsea, and later at Stoke Newington under Rev. John Bransby, D. D. For the first time, and in a strange country, Poe was separated from his foster parents, an event he did not like in spite of any correspondence from John Allan to the contrary. "Lonely and unhappy" (Silverman 18) is how Poe recalled the memory later in life. Living "away from his caretakers [the Allans], under new and unfamiliar custodians, in a strange country, angered and frightened him." He was alone, alien in a world steeped in mystery, antiquity, and old-world charm, its magnificent glooms evident in every gnarled tree, every strange custom, in the odd music of its language, the grayness of its weathers—the color, tone, and form of things that in time would surface in such works as "William Wilson," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Ulalume," "The Sleeper," "Fairyland," and others.

His mates at Bransby's school never let him forget that he was not one of them. The same can be said of the decline in his relationship with John Allan, who indulged his wife's desire to foster the child, and yet the older Poe got, the more Allan reminded him that he would never be one of them—that Allan's world, Allan's possession, was not, nor ever would be Poe's. Paradoxically, while in England, perhaps for the sake of Allan's reputation (Poe being an orphan), the boy was known as Edgar Allan. "Edgar Allan was a quick and clever boy," Bransby responded when asked of the boy's progress, "and would have been a very good boy if he had

not been spoilt by his parents" (qtd. in Quinn 71-72). The point is it was in England that his poetic instincts were first aroused, if through a violence of identity, necessity, and ill-timed solitudes. Poe scholar and critic J. Gerald Kennedy writes that it was in England that "his [Poe's] own romantic agony had begun" (80). Through an unconscious act of self-preservation and benign fate, poetry proved to be the one possible language able to sound the depths of a mind as unfathomable, undiscovered, capable, and under rigor of change as that of young Poe, particularly in its turbulent state, as apparently it was.

If it is true that poets are born, not made [*poeta nascitur, non fit*], England was Poe's truer nativity. And if it is true, as Kopley asserts in the opening line of his biography concerning Poe's belief in his own genius, it is just as true or probable that he recognized and began to believe in himself as a poet, that the genius and the poet awoke, rose, and flourished together. Prose, verse, or otherwise, Poe is always a poet [present tense intentional]. Kopley quotes a line from "Tamerlane" that applies. "The mystic empire and high power / Giv'n by the energetic might / Of Genius, at its natal hour" (1). Kennedy uses the word "infatuated" (79) to describe young Poe's attachment to the art. When he returned to America in August 1820, he was altered. Not long after that, the rift between Poe and Allan began clawing its way to permanence. "I reach'd my home — my home no more — / For all was flown that made it so — / I pass'd from out its mossy door, / In vacant idleness of woe" (Mabbott 1.39).

ALWAYS JANE

The following excerpts are from "Tamerlane," as it appeared in *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. *By a Bostonian* in 1827. The poet, eighteen years old upon publication, had, by then, suffered the loss of Jane Stanard three years earlier, a woman remembered in a letter from Poe to

Sarah Whitman as “the first, purely ideal love of my soul” (*Letters* 2.385). A poet in love is not a small thing, and certainly not a quiet one. Following the death of Mrs. Stanard, the fifteen-year-old Poe would visit Shockoe Hill Cemetery, sometimes with his friend, Rob Stanard. But he would also go alone at night. According to Sarah Helen Whitman, Poe would let “himself out at a certain window of the establishment & going to the cemetery where she was entombed, & and that on stormy & dreary nights he went most often—that he could not endure to think of her lying there forsaken & forgotten” (Miller 104). “Tamerlane,” one of the poet’s earliest poems, memorializes Jane, his earliest Helen. That said, it was one of many such poems, such as “The Sleeper,” “To Helen,” “Lenore,” “Dreamland,” and others that Poe sets “on the cusp of life and death, in this case also in the liminal space representing the meeting point of the earthly and the otherworldly” (McAdams 85). Even this early in the career of his verse, it is not difficult to detect the dry bones of “Annabel Lee,” and by way of the motifs that appear in this first volume—the death, or loss of a woman, the lost paradise, the reminiscence, the voice of the bereaved, the enshrinements, the impossibilities—are all present in this title poem.

Of “Tamerlane,” Mabbot writes that while “it is not a great poem, there are flashes of true fire, even in the unpolished but never greatly improved first version” (1.22). Hoffman is more exacting in his criticism, asserting that “Tamerlane” is “a poem that nobody today is likely to read for pleasure . . . a poem nobody would read unless he had to, one which is valuable chiefly for what it suggests about the young Poe's reading and for demonstrating his limitations” (30). Poe had been reading Byron, of course, and Milton, whose influence the poet had not yet fully shed. To capsulize, “Tamerlane” is a confession to a priest of a peasant who makes good, then returns home intending to marry but discovers it is too late, for his beloved is dead. The following stanzas are from Mabbot [A], the earliest version of the poem. Though there were

significant changes in sequent versions (alphabetically from A to H in Mabbott), this is Poe's first fire, his debut—young, untried, naked to the world. To John Neal, Poe writes:

> I am about to publish a volume of "Poems" — the greater part written before I was fifteen. Speaking about 'Heaven', the Editor of the Yankee says, He might write a beautiful, if not a magnificent poem — (the very first words of encouragement I ever remember to have heard). I am very certain that, as yet I have not written either — but that I can, I will take [my] oath — if they will give me time. (*Letters* 1.32)

V.

I have no words, alas! to tell
The loveliness of loving well!
Nor would I dare attempt to trace
The breathing beauty of a face,
Which ev'n to my impassion'd mind,
Leaves not its memory behind.
In spring of life have ye ne'er dwelt
Some object of delight upon,
With steadfast eye, till ye have felt
The earth reel – and the vision gone?
And I have held to mem'ry's eye
One object – and but one – until
Its very form hath pass'd me by,
But left its influence with me still. (Mabbott 1.29)

This stanza and others are haunted by the memory of a woman, of "The breathing beauty of a face," an image which giddy passion has burned from the memory, some "object of delight" which the poet-narrator will ultimately sacrifice at the altar of ambition. We are not given any awareness of her death, only her absence, though death is the accepted convention. When it comes to naming the source of the woman, Elmira Royster, Poe's childhood sweetheart and future fiancée, comes up more than others, though she was certain Poe addressed none of his poems to her. Mabbot cites Elmira as the woman who haunts "Tamerlane," as does Silverman and Kopley, though, in fairness, Kopley writes, "In these varied lines we seem to have both Elmira Royster and Jane Stanard" (85). There is always Jane. It is also fair to note that the poet

proper, being a creature of artifice, is at liberty to re-create a woman out of parts, so to speak, so naming sources is, even among the well-informed, an exercise in speculation.

Tamerlane unspeaks his soul, plundering his memory in private confession to a priest, and soberly laments someone abandoned or left behind a private though momentary Eden between himself and the "one object," now lost to evanescence. His tone is one of resolve, being, as he was, cognizant of the sacrifice, though memory, however opaque, leaves its print. "One object – and but one – until / Its very form hath pass'd me by / But left its influence with me still" (Mabbott 1.29-30). To paraphrase: In youth, father, did you not fix your delight upon an object until some power greater than that delight took it from you?

VI.

Yes! she [was] worthy of all love!
Such as in infancy was mine
Tho' then its passion could not be:
'Twas such as angel minds above
Might envy — her young heart the shrine
On which my ev'ry hope and thought
Were incense — then a goodly gift —
For they were childish, without sin,
Pure as her young examples taught;
Why did I leave it and adrift,
Trust to the fickle star within? (1.30)

This love, the poet muses, had the power and advantages of innocence. Though a distance of twenty-two years separate these two poems, these lines are genetically linked to "Annabel Lee"—"Such love as in infancy was mine." Being children together, the envy of angels, worthy of all love, the heart being the "shrine / On which every hope and thought / Were incense."

I was a child and she was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love—
I and my Annabel Lee—
With a love the wingéd seraphs of Heaven
Coveted her and me. (1.477)

The second version of "Tamerlane," [B], saw a radical revision that removed the angelic envy, replacing "'Twas such as angel minds above / Might envy — her young heart the shrine / On which my ev'ry hope and thought / Were incense . . ." with "There were no holier thoughts than thine. / I lov'd thee as an angel might, / With ray of the all-living light / Which blazes upon Edis' shrine" (1.41). In the final (H) version of "Tamerlane," for this passage, Poe reverted back, making simple edits to his original text. In stanza 7 [A] Tamerlane reminiscences, recalling the sensual delights and the love known from childhood. Again, the angelic likenesses in stanza 8, and the great line, "I had no being but in thee!"

VII.

The hallow'd mem'ry of those years
Comes o'er me in these lonely hours,
And, with sweet lovliness, appears
As perfume of strange summer flow'rs;
Of flow'rs which we have known before
In infancy, which seen, recall
To mind — not flow'rs alone — but more
Our earthly life, and love — and all. (1.31)

VIII.

Yes! she was worthy of all love!
Ev'n such as from th' accursed time
My spirit with the tempest strove,
When on the mountain peak alone,
Ambition lent it a new tone,
And bade it first to dream of crime,
My phrenzy [[frenzy]] to her bosom taught:
We still were young: no purer thought
Dwell [[Dwelt]] in a seraph's breast than thine;
For passionate love is still divine:
I lov'd her as an angel might
With ray of the all living light
Which blazes upon Edis' shrine. (4)
It is not surely sin to name,
With such as mine — that mystic flame,
I had no being but in thee!

Switching to Mabbott [H], the final revision, there is a noticeable seasoning in the lines, plus it is around one hundred and fifty lines lighter, 243 lines as opposed to 403. As Tamerlane dies, McAdams observes, he "does not bid farewell to 'human love' itself, which 'leav'st the heart a wilderness' but he bids farewell to the 'idea' of the ideal form of 'love' presumably to move toward the actual ideal form of that love in heaven" (80), that is, a striving toward sublimity. She adds that once love is an "idea, rather than a defined human emotion, all of 'life around' comes together with 'music of so strange a sound / And beauty of so wild a birth.'"

> O, human love! thou spirit given,
> On Earth, of all we hope in Heaven!
> Which fall'st into the soul like rain
> Upon the Siroc-wither'd plain,
> And, failing in thy power to bless,
> But leav'st the heart a wilderness!
> Idea! which bindest life around
> With music of so strange a sound
> And beauty of so wild a birth—
> Farewell! for I have won the Earth. (1.59)

The motifs under scrutiny are not limited to Poe's verse, or his tales. His letters are replete with his principal themes, as much as any of his poems, and without the conventional restraints of verse—flush, agonized, unrestricted by publishing or commercial anxieties. It is striking how naked his words can be. It is not uncommon to cringe at their magnitude, at his vulnerability and exposure, yet, strangely, these very things accounting as well for their beauty. Frances Osgood, a close friend of Poe, writes:

> But it was in his conversations and his letters, far more than in his published poetry and prose writings, that the genius of Poe was most gloriously revealed. His letters were divinely beautiful, and for hours I have listened to him, entranced by strains of such pure and almost celestial eloquence as I have never read or heard elsewhere. (*Saroni's* 119)

In the same letter to Sarah Whitman of 1 October 1848 mentioned earlier, Poe says the very thing, the one thing his poetry continues to say. It is the year before his death, the year or so

following his wife's death. He is lost, broken, adrift, a thing his language cannot dissemble. He is addressing Sarah Whitman, but it is the poet speaking now, immersed in his theme, his pitch risen, his voice altered, now Orphic, the lyric charmed. There is something lonely in his voice, speaking beyond her, to his true Helen—his Virginia, his Jane, his Eliza, to the enshrined—a salvation, a redemption, free of the usual components or architectural forms by which we recognize verse.

> I saw that you were Helen — my Helen — the Helen of a thousand dreams — she whose visionary lips had so often lingered upon my own in the divine trance of passion — she whom the great Giver of all Good had preordained to be mine — mine only — if not now, alas! then at least hereafter and forever, in the heavens. — You spoke falteringly and seemed scarcely conscious of what you said. I heard no words — only the soft voice, more familiar to me than my own, and more melodious than the song of the angels. Your hand rested in mine, and my whole soul shook with a tremulous ecstasy. And then but for very shame — I would have fallen at your feet in as pure — in as real a worship as was ever offered to Idol or to God. (*Letters* 2.387)

Though the composition of "Annabel Lee" is still months away, one can hear and feel its impressions in the passage above—the trance, the angelic, the melodious. The tragic notion of life as a poem, though it is not.

These words, and words like them, are as true a poem as any of his published works, without the broken lines and general physics of verse, but are nonetheless from the same reserve. The difference being that such declarations have a habit of being too close, too intimate, too transparent, or, as his agonized Romeo would say, "Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear" (*Rom.* 1.5.47). The artifacts are there: the beautiful woman, "if not now, alas! then at least hereafter and forever in the heavens," the enshrinement, "but for very shame—I would have fallen at your feet as in pure—in as real a worship as was offered to Idol or to God" (*Letters* 2.387), the dreaming somnambulance, "the divine trance of passion," the possession, if not here,

then in the heavenlies, the comparison to angels, the entire theatre of the "love that was more than love."

In a discussion of Poe's idealization of women (his mother, his stepmother, Jane Stanard, Virginia, Francis Osgood, Sarah Helen Whitman, 'Annie' Richmond), Lorrine Pruette writes:

> His [Poe's] nature demanded the adoration and approval of "woman," rather than sexual conquests, and he worshiped in his poems a feminine idealization to which he ascribed various names. These women are never human; they are not warm flesh and blood, loving, hating, or coming late to appointments — they are simply beautiful lay figures around which to hang wreaths of poetical sentiments. His emotional interest lay in himself, rather than in outer objects; he wished to be loved, rather than to love. (380)

This is a heavy indictment with sharp edges, and yet I cannot argue with it. And Poe's desire for Ms. Whitman may not be all it appears to be. Of course, there is the "idea" of love that seems out front, that evokes the honeyed ooze of lyrical speech, but there is more to it than that. Pruette's assessment notwithstanding, the argument can be made that the "idea" was all there was, that in its way it was sufficient, it was enough. Engaged at one point to Sarah Helen Whitman, strained and conditional as it was, and having suffered the prospective mother-in-law's indignities, once the smoke cleared and the engagement seemed stable, all Poe had to do to secure the marriage was not drink, as he had vowed to mother and daughter. At last, however, it was the drink that doused any hope of marriage. This is the point: no one is aware of Poe's status as poéte maudit, the noble outcast, more keenly than Poe. Speaking on Poe's "outsiderness in America," McGann says in an interview:

> Poe is our first world poet. No question about that. Recognized by the greatest figures in the late nineteenth century—Baudelaire, Mallarme, Swinburne, to Valéry—never not recognized for his importance, but a prophet not recognized in his own country. That is definitely true, and especially in the academy. (*American Masters*)

If he shows up for an interview with President Tyler reeking of alcohol and bad judgment, or if Sarah Helen Whitman discovers drink on his breath and in his gait then calls the whole thing off,

it may have some modicum of intention. It is not that Poe has a sudden failure of conscience, an episode of demon possession, or even a lapse in good sense. His mind is too keen, too deliberate than that, too self-possessed. What role the Imp of the Perverse may play in being Poe, no one can speculate just why, perhaps even Poe himself. And those who pretend to know only pretend to know.

WHILE ALL THE WORLD WERE CHIDING

The title that eventually was known as "A Dream" was originally listed as "Untitled," identified by its first line "A Wilder'd being from my birth," [A] (Mabbott 1.79-80). Evolving with its young master, this poem, with minor revision, will appear in two more of Poe's published books of verse—just before the end of 1829 in *Al Aaraaaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems* as "A Dream," [B] and sixteen years later in *The Raven and Other Poems* [E]. The malleability of this poem and poems of like thematic substance, and the continuous tinkering by the poet suggest an editorial unease that will not allow him at times to consider a work "finished." Paul Valéry, French poet and Poe acolyte, in true Poe fashion felt that a poem most often can only be abandoned, not finished. ". . . to be finished," Valery writes, "it [the poem] must strive to cover up its own traces" (289), that is, with each evolutionary step forward a poem must cover its tracks, practice a kind of invisibility, leaving little or no trace of the intense rigor that went into its making and remaking, silencing the ghosts of former iterations. Even so, the nakedness that public revision of a poem exposes as it alters from publication to publication did not seem to bother Poe. This poem went through four revisions, making appearances in three of the four publications, and a magazine, each with minor variants. The following is [A] of "Untitled."

A wilder'd being from my birth
My spirit spurn'd control,
But now, abroad on the wide earth,
Where wand'rest thou my soul?

In visions of the dark night
I have dream'd of joy departed —
But a waking dream of life and light
Hath left me broken-hearted.

And what is not a dream by day
To him whose eyes are cast
On things around him with a ray
Turn'd back upon the past?

That holy dream — that holy dream,
While all the world were chiding,
Hath cheer'd me as a lovely beam
A lonely spirit guiding —

What tho' that light, thro' misty night
So dimly shone afar —
What could there be more purely bright
In Truth's day — star? (Mabbott 1.79-80)

Whether he wrote this poem any earlier than 1827 is uncertain, though it is not unlikely. Mabbott suggests that "it was composed after Poe left the Allan home in Richmond" (1.79) in March 1827, which would explain the first verse, which is of such different character, tone, and temper than the remainder of the poem it may have been a public response to Allan. Either way, it was gone by the next publication. With its removal, the thematic unity of the poem is strengthened, as well as the poetic harmony. As with "Tamerlane," many of the motifs are present already, and will remain intact against any future editorial tampering, any possible alterations being cosmetic only. With little work we are able to identify and inventory them, the first and most conspicuous being the somnambulance, the dream state introduced in the first three lines of stanza 2 expressed by "visions of the dark night," "I have dreamed," and "waking dream." Risking overstatement, the word "dream" is mentioned five times in stanzas 2, 3, and 4.

The death of a woman (absence or loss)—"I have dreamed of joy departed," and spoken with the voice of the bereaved lover, the "broken hearted," which implies, as well, a lost paradise, reminiscence providing undertone, "Ah! what is not a dream by day / To him whose eyes are cast / On things around him with a ray / Turned back upon the past?"

The entire poem is a paean to the memory of a woman, the music in the second stanza weeping quietly into the third where the poet enshrines the great image of his loss, who, again, many scholars have identified the image behind the image as Jane Stanard. Kopley suggests that the "lonely spirit guiding" is Jane (he also names Elmira Royster as a candidate), and there is little argument to the contrary. "While all the world were chiding," may reflect the ongoing tensions between John Allan and Poe at that time of his life, but the verse is too wise to say so if it is. And the "chiding" is overwhelmed by the other three lines of that stanza, reducing Allan's indignation, if present at all, to background noise. While it seems almost superfluous to mention at this point, at the death of Jane Stanard, there was a sad and noticeable droop in the young poet's countenance, his usual bounce forever altered. Once "'bright and full of fun and high spirits, [young Poe] appeared for some time grieving and depressed'" (57). Her death, Kopley adds, was "a severe blow: he [Poe] had lost his beautiful consoler."

By stanzas 3 and 4, the poet's language is exalted, reaching, as it attempts to do, for language that is unearthly and untaught, born out of man's profound thirst. In his theology, at times disguised as poetic theory, Poe gives the most venerated seat of influence to Beauty. "An immortal instinct, deep within the spirit of man, is thus, plainly, a sense of the Beautiful" (*Collected Tales* 894). Phrases like "That holy dream" of this poem, or the "Holy land" of his 1831 "To Helen," demand a language suitable to the terrain and to its subject. When Poe

composes, it seems he obligates his genius to those living artifacts from the deepest and most private reserves that are worthy of this effort.

In its final version [E], known as "A Dream," which appears in *The Raven and Other Poems*, there are small but significant changes in the first two lines of the last stanza only.

> What though that light, thro' storm and night
> So trembled from afar —
> What could there be more purely bright
> In Truth's day-star?

"Trembled," here is a synonym for the more common "shimmering" or "twinkling," a more lyrically expressive word suggesting fragility and fear (holy fear, awe), not unlike deep veneration or throes of ecstasy in the presence of "Truth's day star," all compatible with the motifs inventoried in this study. Setting his loss to meter (alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and trimeter), the poet narrator hears and sets his thought to the music of another world. Biblically, there is no brighter light, figuratively or otherwise, than the day star. Nor one of greater weight or import. In scripture, it is synonymous with "the bright and morning star," or "star of the morning," and not only is it one of the most elevated tropes of the Old Testament, it is also one of the venerated titles given to Jesus in the New; "I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star" (*King James Version*, Rev. 22:16). Its use at the close of this poem confers upon the "lonely spirit guiding" the highest possible seat of importance. She *is* truth (though no gender is designated).

The Bible serving as a prop also allows an alternate reading of last few lines, curiously apropos to our poet. The "day star," while associated with Christ, has a dark counter, an impish alter ego in the Old Testament [Lucifer]—the righteous Jesus of one covenant being the agency of redemption from the Lucifer-Satan, the foil of paradise, in the other—all this of which a precocious, impassioned, well-read and appetite-wild young poet would be aware of, especially

given the Christian culture of his America, its accelerated scriptural literacy, perhaps even after reading his Milton. Lucifer—beautiful, angel of God, first and brightest among his kind, "Starr of Starrs" among the angels—before his fall was known as the "day star." His name means "bearer of light." In the biblical narrative, Lucifer and Christ are the ultimate and embattled warriors of the supernatural realm, the primordial conflict between good and evil. Lucifer, in a happier time, a prelapsarian time before time, was the Star of the Morning. In the great bloat of his pride, however, he sought to be like God, to usurp the throne of the Most High. It did not take. The day star was given a new name—Satan—and a new dominion. The dynamics of redemption demanded a Christ to counteract the spoil. It is unlikely that the young poet meant the phrase other than its exalted meaning, especially with his beloved Jane at the center of the argument, but its duality, the agon between light and dark, life and death, good and evil, and the old brawl between himself and himself, or with life, would have held irresistible attractions for the young genius, if but unconscious.

FOR THE MOON NEVER BEAMS

"Dreams," another poem from Poe's 1827 collection, is a lyric poem on the alternative to life as it actually is. "'Twere better than the cold reality / Of waking life, to him whose heart must be, / And hath been still, upon the lovely earth, / A chaos of deep passion, from his birth" (Mabbott 1.68). *A chaos of deep passion*. Shakespearean in stature, a line of this character will stand out to a reader, not only for its sonic buoyancy, the adrenaline it infuses into a line, but also by the descriptive justice it does to what Kopley refers to as Poe's "visionary boyhood" (86). In "Dreams," the poet is not necessarily under any hypnosis other than an ecstatic desire for an otherworld of a kind, extending his reach, so to speak, not toward the heaven of his early youth,

sitting week after week in Monumental Episcopal Church, pew No. 80, with the Allans, but something perhaps akin to it, something "beyond," what might be termed the *attainable unattainable*, a desire for the supernal by another name. He is somnambulant if by a fervent desire to be so, to be comfortably on the other side of reality, imparadised in a dream. There is no dead woman, no bereaved lover except perhaps in the undercurrent of the poem. A longing for paradise "and Love – and all our own!" occupies his thoughts, the bounty of dreams far greater than the mere hopes of buoyant youth. There is, however, an aloneness, a motif common to many of his poems.

It is worth a slight digression, having mentioned the church Poe attended as the Allan's foster child. Eliza Poe, the poet's biological mother, perhaps his deeper Helen, died of tuberculosis on 8 December 1811, just shy of Poe's third birthday. Later that same month, on 26 December, the chandelier at the Richmond Theater fell, burning the theater to the ground, a theater where Eliza Poe had performed many times before her death. Out of the six hundred souls who attended the theater that night, seventy-two were killed. When the chandelier fell, preparations were being made for the second act of *Raymond and Agnes, or The Bleeding Nun*, a melodramatic tale that features a pair of star-cross'd lovers, the machinations of a jealous older female who forces a young girl in love to enter a convent, a girl who later pretends to be the ghost of a nun in a failed plot for her escape. In the end, the lovers come together at last, but not before enduring tragedy which includes a still-born child born in the dank bowels of the convent. In 1814, three years after the fire, an Episcopal church was erected on the site of the theater. No graves or tombstones of the seventy-two victims were erected. The church itself became the "monument" to the memory of the deceased, built, as it was, over their remains. The church was christened "The Monumental Episcopal Church." A deliciously dark tale of its own, as a young

boy Poe received his exposure, his first formal spiritual instruction in a building erected over seventy-two corpses and the cinders of a theater in which his dead mother had performed, a mother he only knew by some remote bone-deep feature of memory. The associations are numerous. Though this may seem hardly worth mentioning, this historical drama and all its many actors are part of Poe's literary and metaphysical DNA, the fine print, the parentage of his works. Note the motifs embedded in the above: the death of a beautiful woman (his mother), the spoiled paradise of the play [*Raymond and Agnes, or The Bleeding Nun*] interrupted by fire, an enshrinement, the envy of someone in power, a nun, the angel "not half so happy in heaven."

The first version of "Dreams," [A], is not separated into stanzas. The final version [C] is divided into four stanzas (the text from A to C is altered by a few minor variants). The extraordinary third stanza [C] remained unaltered through three revisions of the poem.

> 'Twas once and only once and the wild hour
> From my remembrance shall not pass—some power
> Or spell had bound me—'twas the chilly wind
> Came o'er me in the night and left behind
> Its image on my spirit, or the moon
> Shone on my slumbers in her lofty noon
> Too coldly—or the stars—howe'er it was
> That dream was as that night wind—let it pass. (1.69)

Chill, pellucid, dreaming, oracular, conscious or unconscious there is more going on in these lines than mere artifice. The poet-narrator made it known in the first few lines of the first stanza that he prefers dreams over the reality he knows. This stanza has a similar transcendence of tone and meaning one hears in the closing passage of Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, published two years after his death. Autobiographical novelist that Wolfe was, Foxhall Edwards, or Fox, is a fictionalized version of the real-life Maxwell Perkins, Wolfe's editor. The following is a letter that the protagonist, George Webber, writes to Foxhall Edwards.

> Dear Fox, old friend, thus we have come to the end of the road that we were to go together. My tale is finished—and so farewell. But before I go, I have just one more thing to tell you: Something has spoken to me in the night, burning the tapers of the waning year; something has spoken in the night, and told me I shall die, I know not where. Saying: "To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave the friends you loved, for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth—— "—Whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending—a wind is rising, and the rivers flow." (743)

A young man at the height of his powers, Wolfe was not aware he was going to die before the release of his book, and yet the last words printed on page 743 of his 743-page book proved eerily prophetic. For certain writers, Poe among them, through some agency of genius the metaphysical uncanny is woven into that liminal space, that twilight between life and art—where the strings are taut, the pressures immense, where the unheard music is. There is a profound similitude between "Something has spoken to me in the night" and "'twas the chilly wind / Came o'er me in the night and left behind / Its image on my spirit." Spirit, whose realm has no obligation to time forward or backward though it ranges freely in both. All inferences in this stanza point to a time to come—the chill whispers that shudder on his flesh, as quickly as it speaks, it is gone "as the night wind—let it pass."

But what print did the chilly wind leave? "Annabel Lee" is still over two decades away, and yet the entire third stanza depicts one of those rare "once and only once and the wild hour" oracular moments the fictive poet-narrator hears or thinks he hears, or senses something just outside comprehension—in this case, coming to him by way of a chilly wind, and with that wind a moon at its height, in a dream that "was as the night wind" (1.69), a spell powerful enough to leave behind the impression of a woman—beautiful, absent but in dreams and in poems, of a "Paradise and Love – and all our own!" This is not to suggest, necessarily, that this stanza possesses a clairvoyance, though it certainly excites by a literary one. What it may reasonably

suggest is that the Ur elements of “Annabel Lee” were, not unlike the motifs inventoried in this study, slowly being arranged in Poe’s thought life, that there is an ideal set piece under development, unconscious as much of it is, just outside the young poet’s comprehension. We see glimpses of it, artifacts, in “Evening Star,” “The Lake,” “The City in the Sea,” “Fairy-Land,” “The Sleeper,” “The City of the Dead,” “Ulalume,” and others, wherever there is a high moon or a chill in the night, death, a broken paradise, or the moody twilight of a dream. This, of course, is conjecture—“That dream was as the night-wind — let it pass.” But that which is in “a chaos of deep passion” to one poet is equally achieved “in a fine frenzy rolling” in another. Still, the prophetic visionary cannot be excused in Poe or lightly passed over. Again, the uncanny being that which one only thinks they hear. “That dream was as the night-wind — let it pass.”

IN HEAVEN OF HEART ENSHRIN'D

“To – – – – ” in *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Other Poems* (1829) is a short poem that incorporates the death of a beautiful woman, the voice of the bereaved, a dream state, enshrinement—her words are music, “Thine eyes, in Heaven of heart enshrin’d,” falling, as they do, on his “funereal mind” suggesting an impossibility between himself and the – – – – of the title, the intended. In Mabbott’s table of contents for this volume of poems (there is no table of contents in the original), following the cryptic title of this poem, within parentheses, it says (To Elmira?), meaning Elmira Royster Shelton, who, in spite of the mutual love between her and Poe when young, did not succeed. The narrator poet is safe within the sanctuary of his dreams and the truth that gold cannot purchase.

> The bowers whereat, in dreams, I see
> The wantonest singing birds
> Are lips — and all thy melody
> Of lip-begotten words —

Thine eyes, in Heaven of heart enshrin'd
Then desolately fall,
O! God! on my funereal mind
Like starlight on a pall —

Thy heart — thy heart! — I wake and sigh,
And sleep to dream till day
Of truth that gold can never buy —
Of the trifles that it may. (Mabbott 1.132)

Death alone carries the weight in poems like "The City in the Sea" [H], 1831: "Lo! Death has reared himself a throne / In a strange city lying alone / Far down within the dim West, / Where the good and the bad and the worst and the best / Have gone to their eternal rest" (1.201).

JUSTLY CALLED A MASTERPIECE

Mabbott refers to "Israfel" as "one of Poe's great accomplishments. It may justly be called a masterpiece" (1.171). "It's not only that 'Israfel' sounds good," Richard Wilbur responded in an interview, "it's that somehow the movement of the verse and the chiming of the verse all overwhelm and transform what is ordinary in the language" (Cantolupo 67). This poem possesses none of the motifs discussed so far but will help expound another—a lost paradise—the divide between what was, and what might have been. The loss of a beloved alone implies a lost paradise, the lost bliss between two people in love. Israfel, being a creature of the heavenlies, while his playing is, indeed, heavenly, and with heavenly effects, it is little wonder that such a being might play so "wildly well." Unlike his abode, the world below is a world of "sweets and sours." Mildly cynical, but cynical nonetheless, the poem expresses doubt, if obliquely, that such an angelic creature could feel what the poet feels, that he is, by the nature of his beatitude, exempt, that he has not had to pay a cost for his art through suffering. "The extacies [sic] above / With thy burning measures suit – / Thy grief – if any – thy love / With the fervor of thy lute –

Well may the stars be mute!" (Mabbott 1.174). Your grief, "if any," would shame those stars to silence.

The most telling line of the latter part of the poem is line 36: "Our flowers are merely – flowers." An almost modern exercise in subtlety, Poe adds the slightest pause after "merely," the length of an en dash, affecting collapse or resolve when performed, a weightless sigh of hard truth. To be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, a possible counter for this opinion is suggested by the "The trembling living wire / Of those unusual strings," representing both his lyre and his "heart strings." For optimal sound, the strings of a lyre or a lute must endure significant pressure, pulled taut, as they are, to a preferred pitch, thereby forming an image of suffering which is not beyond the acuities of Poe. The following stanzas are from Mabbott [G].

> In Heaven a spirit doth dwell
> "Whose heart-strings are a lute;"
> None sing so wildly well
> As the angel Israfel,
> And the giddy start (so legends tell)
> Ceasing their hymns, attend the spell
> Of his voice, all mute.
>
> Tottering above
> In her highest noon,
> The enamoured moon
> Blushes with love,
> While, to listen, the red levin
> (With the rapid Pleiads, even,
> Which were seven,)
> Pauses in Heaven.
>
> And they say (the starry choir
> And the other listening things)
> The Israfeli's fire
> Is owing to that lyre
> By which he sits and sings—
> The trembling living wire
> Of those natural things. (1.175-76)

These first three stanzas establish the profound effects of Israfel's lyre. The entire angelic host stops to listen. At its height ("her highest noon," a construct that appears also in "Dreams"), even the moon blushes as Israfel's song exposes something of its secrets. All nature is subject to Israfel's hypnosis.

A kind of divinized Orpheus, over the course of the poem Israfel plays both the lute and the lyre, two similar but very different instruments. In Mabbott's notes he observes that in the earlier version of the poem "Poe wrote as if the lute and the lyre were identical," adding that Poe corrected the mistake in later versions. The text, however, seems to remain unchanged from the first version to the last with no such correction. In [A] 3.14-16: "That Israfeli's fire / Is owing to that lyre / With those unusual strings" (1.174). In [G] 3.18-20: "The Israfeli's fire / Is owing to that lyre / By which he sits and sing" (1.176). In [A] 6.31-33, he plays the lute: "Thy grief – if any – thy love / With the fervor of thy lute – / Well may the stars be mute!" (174). Likewise, the lute is played in [G] 6:34-39: "With thy burning measures suit – / Thy grief, thy joy, thy hate, thy love, / With the fervour of thy lute – Well may the stars be mute!" The cynicism comes to bloom in the last stanza [G].

> If I did dwell where Israfel
> Hath dwelt, and he where I,
> He would not sing one half so well –
> One half as passionately,
> And a stormier note than this would swell
> From my lyre within the sky. (1.176-77)

In *The Untuning of the Sky*, John Hollander suggests that the three instruments—lute, lyre, and harp—are somewhat interchangeable (and they certainly are in Poe), that their use in literature unites the "contemporary string instrument with those of David and Orpheus . . . representing no capricious substitution of one term for another. Rather, it depends upon a consistent habit of figurative association of the instruments and what they stand for" (45).

THE MUSIC OF A DREAM: "SERENADE"

Of the moods that Poe is able to achieve in a poem, serenity is the most pleasant. Part of the attraction may be that there are so few poems for which it can be said that are serene, making those stand out and welcomed that are. This is another poem that has no need to rush. To rush, to push certain poems along, too often makes caricatures of them, ditties, something less than what they were intended or what the poet hears. This poem, "Serenade," like others in its class, sets its own pace. Nor do the words have to compete with excess emotion—horror, ecstasy, etc. Thematically, there is no death, no lost paradise or bereaved lover, unless the depth of quietude, "sleep," or "slumber" may be so interpreted, but that is unlikely. Love of a woman, the undersong of most of the motifs in this study, carries this poem—it suffuses the atmosphere, the idyll of nature at nighttime, in the tone of the narrator's voice. The poem emphasizes dreams and the romantic affections for and connection to nature, not to interrupt its affinities to quietude, reflected, as it is, in the narrator's affections for his beloved Adeline.

> So sweet the hour – so calm the time.
> I feel it more than half a crime
> When Nature sleeps and stars are mute,
> To mar the silence ev'n with a lute. (Mabbott 1.222)

The title, "Serenade," suggests both song and serenity. Context, mood, and tone are comparable to a reverie under the moon with Lorenzo and Jessica in Act 5 of *The Merchant of Venice*.

> In such a night as this,
> When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees,
> And they did make no noise, in such a night
> Troilus methinks mounted the Troyan walls,
> And sigh'd his soul toward the Grecian tents,
> Where Cressid lay that night. (5.1.1-6).

The narrator does not wish to sully in the slightest way the serenity of the night, of nature, or the slumbering Adeline.

> But list! – so soft and low
> Thy lover's voice tonight shall flow
> The, scarce awake, thy soul shall deem
> My words the music of a dream.
> Thus, while no single sound too rude,
> Upon thy slumber shall intrude,
> Our thoughts, our souls – O God above!
> In every deed shall mingle, love. (Mabbott 1.223)

This is one of Poe's tenderest poems. It watches her sleep (and sleep here is not euphemistic). Its voice soft, weightless. Mabbott mentions that it appeared in the 20 April 1833 edition of the *Baltimore Saturday Visiter* [sic] and yet was buried or hidden until it was disinterred, so to speak, in 1917 and republished. This is uncannily apropos, for it is not Poe's typical fare.

Chapter 3 — Roderick Usher's Guitar: A Study in Collapse

There is one consistent and ever-present component of Poe's verse that works particularly well with the more musical and densely metered poems like "The Raven," "Ulalume," "The Bells," and "Annabel Lee," creating subtleties of effect that have more to do with the physics of a poem, its science of movement and stress. In "Annabel Lee," however, it does much more than keep time. It creates an extraordinary ambient effect, allowing the listener to sense a familiar movement of nature, one that becomes audible by the kind of spectral overhearing mentioned earlier, which begs the question whether its use was intentional or not. What I am referring to is the cycle of *saturation* and *collapse*, a concept similar to the *repulsion - attraction* cycle in *Eureka*. The mechanics of this cycle are best understood and demonstrated by the simple act of breathing, which may be defined in one sense as a continuous cycle of fill and release. Sufficient air is taken into the lungs until some maximum or close to maximum capacity is achieved, then, to complete the cycle, the air is released, temporarily emptying or collapsing the lungs until the cycle repeats itself all over again; and all this by involuntary movement. This same cycle determines the manner and rhythm in which a heart keeps time—each beat, each separate pulse being a cycle of saturation and collapse. The narrative arc of a well-conceived, well-executed tale moves forward, achieving some degree of ascent until it reaches apex, a summit at which point the dénouement is set in motion, and by virtue of its own velocity brings the tale to its conclusion. Through the agency of Roderick Usher's guitar, this chapter will demonstrate how the cycle of saturation and collapse may offer a more thorough understanding of the decline and ruin of the House of Usher, the beauty of which lies in the sheer unlikelihood that Poe was even aware how perfect his choice of musical instrument was. This guitar reading of "The Fall of the

House of Usher" will also demonstrate how easily this concept assumes a place in the poetic theory of Edgar Poe.

It is in Poe's musicality where we find the mathematician, the logician, the "cool" scientist, the aesthetician, metaphysician, and wordsmith. Embedded in and cultivated by that same musicality is *Eureka*, "The Power of Words," "Island of the Fay," "The Poetic Principle," "The Raven," "The Sleeper," and countless other imaginative works. Poe has the songwriter's ear for the *exact* word and the necessary physics, the syntactical prowess that both marks and sustains that perfection. "So the poet at work is an expectation," Valéry writes. "His ear speaks to him. We wait for the unexpected word – which cannot be foreseen but must be awaited. We are the first to hear it" (174). As Emerson wrote of Shakespeare, Poe has "a vicious ear" (167). The same can be said of his wordcraft.

In all of Poe, a guitar is mentioned only three times. For all his musicianship and musical effects in both his poetry and prose, musical instruments are scarce. "A Tale of Jerusalem" mentions a psaltery and a cithern, crude but effective stringed instruments, forerunners of the guitar, like the lyre, harp, and lute mentioned in the odd tale or poem. In "The Assignation," a guitar is mentioned as a "thrumming" thing (Mabbott 2.153), that is, a thing of small importance in the hands of a character of small importance. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Roderick Usher's guitar, with its "wild improvisations" (2.404) historically has been used to draw attention to his flights of lavish invention, his musical retreats against the chronic unraveling and the decay of his mental state, the guitar creating contrast against those conditions by his mastery of the instrument and the astounding reveries for which his narrator-friend has no explanation other than it being some preternatural consequence of his friend's disorder. However, there is

much more to it than that. The instrument bears a metaphorical weight yet to be identified in Poe studies.

This tale is essentially a study in collapse, for which the guitar provides a magnificent if unexpected image. Roderick Usher was a gifted player, for whom the guitar was more than a hobby, diversion, or mere pastime. According to the narrator, Roderick exercised an almost prophetic command of the instrument. His fingers seemed to move independent of thought, more by intuition, by some metaphysical braille that both dazzled and terrified his friend, as it was beyond his understanding. Roderick's deftness on the instrument is matched only by the rhapsodic precision of Poe's wordcraft (in the observational skills of the narrator). If the guitar speaks, as the narrator says it does, and if it is sentient as Roderick Usher is convinced that all "vegetable" things are, then the guitar has a life and history of its own, apropos to this tale. It is easy to forget by virtue of its transfiguration that a guitar was once a humble tree. And yet, once it dies or is cut down, depending on the type and quality of the wood and the skill of the luthier's hand, it is possible to grant it a glorious afterlife, its own version of the "supernal," something that a mere tree could not have perceived or dreamed. Percy Bysshe Shelley recreates this image masterfully in "With a Guitar, To Jane."

> —and so this tree—
> O that such our death may be—
> Died in sleep, and felt no pain
> To live in happier form again,
> From which, beneath Heaven's fairest star,
> The artist wrought this loved guitar,
> And taught it justly to reply
> To all who question skillfully
> In language gentle as their own. (478)

As for the unskilled, "All this it [the guitar] knows, but will not tell / To those who cannot question well / The spirit that inhabits it / It talks according to the wit / of its companions, and no

more" (478-9). Like the poet and his text, it is a cooperation. Roderick Usher was certainly equipped with the necessary "wit."

Of the story itself, and alluded to above, the first thing to notice about "The Fall of the House of Usher" is the exquisite polish of its narration, what Lynne Shackleford refers to as Poe's "mathematical exactitude" (187). Exactitude, indeed. Finesse and sparkle at this level of facility, when applied to a tale of horror is an unsettling delight, yet no less delight. Whether this paradoxical effect is intentional or not, and I suspect it is, no one could set gloom to music quite like Poe.

> During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. (Mabbott 2.397)

Meticulous, lapidary, unhurried, moving at the unrushed gait of his mount, this sentence is the first of an entire text that lives up to Joseph Conrad's injunction: "A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line" (7). Within view of the House of Usher, at the first sight of the building the narrator uses the phrase "insufferable gloom" (Mabbott 2.397) to describe the uneasiness he feels, a gloom he will not be able to shake, that intensifies as the narrative progresses, reflected, as it is, both in the lush excesses of description throughout and in the mirror-black waters of the tarn. The narrator is not shy about the darkening character of his own anxieties and responds with what appears to be a refined, well-ordered, well-thought-out prolixity, comparable (without the toxicity or decay) to Roderick Usher's condition, a disturbance based on excessive sensitivity to stimuli. The letter the narrator had received from his boyhood friend revealed a fragile, tightly wound character whose body and mind were as wracked and close to caving in as the house itself, the one he had not ventured from in years, seeking, as he was, some ounce of solace from his old friend.

One of Poe's more subtle maelstroms, the long opening paragraph (above) affects a slow descent into someone else's nightmare, and by invitation—the ruin, the decay, images of the world he was entering, drawing him inescapably downward as through a shroud of mist. "There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime," textures of disquietude and menace, the glum anticipations of a Macbeth: "I have almost forgot the taste of fears" (*Mac*. 5.5.9). Wary of a kind of creeping hypnosis, the closer the narrator comes within sight of the house the more he feels it necessary to shake from his spirit what it must feel like to be in a dream, sober being a much healthier option in such a place. He has been invited into an oppressive, phantasmagoric world in an advanced state of putrefaction, a world poised on the verge of collapse, the most noticeable sign being "a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn" (Mabbott 2.400). Rattled, and hardly a paragraph into his journey, the narrator muses: "What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered" (2.397-98). What seems to creep under his skin, and what he is yet to be aware of will come up later in a troubling conversation with Roderick Usher who argues the "sentience of all vegetable things" (2.408), a subject against which the narrator seems dismissive, referring to it as Roderick's "disordered fancy." But for the insistence of his friend, he listens yet withholds comment. Simplified, this "sentience" suggests that the environs of the House of Usher, the foliage, the decrepitude, the "condensation" or congealing of atmosphere itself, sorrow laden, represent a collusion of a kind, of environmental elements, shaped over centuries, down to the bricks, to the unpromising cleft in

the wall that reaches to the tarn. The narrator is beginning to feel what he cannot, or dare not, speak or imagine, and he has not even entered the house yet. Extended, and especially considering Roderick's mounting and debilitative paranoia, this "sentience" applies to the paintings on the wall, to the book he is being read to, the "speaking guitar," the haunted screech of sounds he hears but cannot tell from what or from where they come, and so on, seeing "more devils than vast hell can hold" (*MND* 5.1.9).

The narrator imagines an atmosphere "which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leadenhued" (Mabbott 2.399-400). He describes the minute fungi that "overspread the exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves" with the same deft stroke with which he describes Roderick Usher's hair. "The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face" (2.402), demonstrating not only the premature aging of the severely stressed Roderick Usher, but confirming Richard Wilbur's italicized observation that "The House of Usher *is*, in allegorical fact, the physical body of Roderick Usher, and its dim interior *is*, in fact, Roderick Usher's visionary Mind" (Carlson 264). To extend the metaphor, the lowest recess of the house was, in medieval times, a dungeon; later, a copper lined keep for powder and other ordnance—both suggesting governance, might. At last, it serves as a family vault. A once noble house—royal, empurpled, festive, celebrated, martial, triumphant, the shield and center of a noble race—is now a study in decline.

An observation worthy of mention, for all its perspicuity and sheen, some modern critics cannot help but comment on the superfluity and sweeping involution of the language. Charity McAdams observes that Poe "takes five extended paragraphs before he even enters the house to

portray the landscape and the 'atmosphere peculiar' to the setting" (19). Those five paragraphs represent just over 1200 words approaching 20 percent of the total word count. Composer and scholar, Christian Asplund, who crafted a musical from extracts of "The Fall of the House of Usher," while fascinated by Poe's powers of description, added that, "It is just too much. It is actually doubled over. . . . I became fascinated at how the amount of words devoted to the description so overwhelms the story itself" (Perry 84). But if one musician thinks it too prolix, another is cut to the quick by the haunted grandeur of Poe's writing and the penetration of which it is capable. French composer, Claude Debussy, identified with Roderick Usher to the point of obsession—so much so that he left his opera, *La Chute de la Maison Usher,* unfinished. He felt "the influence of the 'atmosphere' of Poe's stories to the extent that he conflated his own sensitivities with those of Roderick Usher" (McAdams 19). With a refined ear for Poe, Debussy writes:

> I've been working on *La Chute de la Maison Usher* recently and have almost finished a long monologue for Roderick. It's sad enough to make the stones weep for what neurasthenics have to go through. It smells charmingly of mildew obtained by mixing the sounds of the low oboe with violin harmonics. (qtd. in McAdams)

On Poe's genius for atmosphere, Gerard Joseph asserts that physical objects "are suffused with a mingled aura of ineffable beauty and suffocating gloom; houses and palaces and cities are built to a shadowy music and take upon themselves deathlike associations" (420). It is Poe's craftsmanship that prompted Valéry to say, "Poe is the only impeccable writer. He was never mistaken" (qtd. in Bloom *Critical Views* 1). John Tresch, echoing George Woodberry, writes admiringly of the language, of Poe as an architect and mathematician: "The Fall of the House of Usher" is "an intensely self-conscious allegory of artistic construction—a meditation on composition and decomposition" (Tresch 149).

> In artistic construction it ["The Fall of the House of Usher"] does not come short of absolute perfection. The adaptation of the related parts and their union in the total effect are a triumph of literary craft; the intricate details, as it were mellowing and reflecting on ground tone, have the definiteness and precision of inlaid mosaic, or, like premonitions and echoes of theme in music, they are so exactly calculated as to secure their end with the certainty of harmonic law itself. (Woodberry 1.229)

A superbly executed text, particularly from an artist, and certainly from Poe, is most often laced with mysticism, a charm of its own, even if a dark one, so that more often than not, any awareness of prolixity goes unnoticed, an effect one might experience when reading the lush extended passages of Thomas Wolfe or Marcel Proust (both of whom were influenced by Poe). There are reasons someone will read the five thousand pages of Proust's seven-volume *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*]. What is true of them, is true of Poe. Any objection to his prolixity is swallowed up in the enchantments of the movement itself—fluid, hypnotic, erudite, gratifyingly persuasive. Stylist that Poe is, as alluded to earlier, the prose evinces an uncanny sympathetic connection to Roderick's affliction by way of its excesses, holding up, as it were, a mirror. But all this is prelude to the central feature of the argument, that is, what governing dynamic of poetic theory is named and demonstrated in the architecture of Roderick Usher's guitar, common to Poe's verse and to the "cool science" of his *Eureka*.

SPEAKING GUITAR

In a 2020 study called "Things Fall Apart; the Centre Cannot Hold," Shackleford examines what the narrator refers to as Roderick Usher's "morbid acuteness" of his senses. The title of her study, the third line of a poem by William Butler Yeats called "The Second Coming," is a fair assessment of the life and fate of Roderick Usher, a life oppressed by "instability, disorder, madness, and dissolution" (Shackleford 175). "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere /

The ceremony of innocence is drowned" (Yeats 91). Shackleford compares Roderick's affliction, his hypersensitivities, the neurasthenia as Debussy referred to it, to *Sensory Processing Disorder*, or SPD, a neurological disorder that adversely affects how a person responds to sensory stimuli. Adults with SPD experience depression, anxiety, alienation, and fear "because of the brain's inability to process and integrate sensory input appropriately" (175). The afflicted individual will also have difficulty "organizing, integrating, and interpreting sensory information" (176). The narrator details a litany of effects this condition has on his friend, saying that only "the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light . . ." (Mabbott 2.403).

As Tresch does in *The Reason for the Darkness of the Night*, Shackleford sorts through the many topical influences behind Poe's knowledge of psychology and medicine in its evolutionary states in the 1830s and 40s. Tresch writes, "Understanding his life and work demands close attention to his multiform engagements with these theories, methods, and discoveries. In return, Poe's life and works are vividly revealing of modern science in a decisive moment" (9). Poe moved to Philadelphia from New York in 1838. Due to two well-known and well-respected medical schools, the University of Pennsylvania and Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia was among the nation's chief medical centers. A Philadelphia publishing house, Carey and Lea, printed more medical books than any other genre with the exception of fiction, which at the time was beginning to include medical and mental health in popular novels. Poe, of course, because of his expanding intellectual appetites made all this work to his advantage, "depicting in his tales mental disorders that the turn-of-the-nineteenth century medical community was exploring" (Shackleford 177). Psychological studies were becoming more eminent during this time as well. Titles like Norman Dain's *Concepts of Insanity in the United*

States, 1789-1865, were available to lay as well as professional readers, a book that explored the evolution of treatment methods and how they had changed since the late eighteenth century. Poe most likely became informed about "tuberculosis, nervous fever, miasma, and phrenology that he used in his tales" (178) from Dr. Robley Dunglingson's *Medical Dictionary* [1833]. Another popular book on mental disorder available at the time and may have been of interest to Poe was James Cowles Pritchard's *Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* which referred to "forms of mental illness in which the intellectual powers remain primarily undiminished." Shackleford adds that "With his passion for scientific fact and his interest in abnormal mental states, Poe would have been likely to turn to systems of contemporary psychology in the same way that modern writers have turned to Freud and Jung" (178-79).

One of the more popular works on mental illness for decades was Benjamin Rush's *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind*, published in 1812. It is almost certain Poe drew information from this well-known book. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," to "pass away this terrible night together" (Mabbot 2.413), the narrator reads to Roderick Usher from Sir Launcelot Canning's *The Mad Trist*, not that it had anything of interest to "the lofty and spiritual ideality" of his friend, but simply because it was at hand. As he reads a certain portion of the book, he hears "a very cracking and ripping sound" (2.414). Continuing to read, he is interrupted again, saying ". . . I did actually hear (although from what direction it proceeded I found it impossible to say) a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound." In Rush's *Medical Inquiries*, the source, at least for this passage, reads:

> The senses of hearing and seeing are uncommonly acute. This is obvious, from their hearing *so distinctly low and distant sounds*, and from their prompt recollection of long unseen and forgotten faces, and of the resemblance of persons, whom they have never seen before, to their parents, or to some other of their ancestors. The tongue is generally

> moist, and frequently has a whitish appearance, such as occurs in common fevers. There is sometimes a preternatural secretion of saliva and mucus in the mouth and throat . . . . (145-146) [italics mine]

While this medical opinion satisfies Roderick's present malady, it does not explain how the narrator hears the same sounds. Again, the house and its environs possess a sentience, a frightfully adept conscience, capable of feeling, sensing, and, we must concede, of making sound, both metaphorical and literal, the "cracking and ripping" being evidence of the slow implosion of the House of Usher, mirrored in the disintegration, the cracking and ripping of Roderick's mind and spirit. Another highly probable association concerning the pathology similar to those exhibited by Roderick Usher is the possession of abilities (specifically artistic abilities) normally outside the range of those suffering the breadth of mental illness and strain that Usher seems to be suffering. Considering the prowess that the narrator attributes to Roderick's skill on the guitar and the paintings, the following excerpt helps explain Poe's adept use of this information.

> From a part of the brain being preternaturally elevated, but not diseased, the mind sometimes discovers not only unusual strength and acuteness, but certain talents it never exhibited before. The records of the wit and cunning of madmen are numerous in every country. (153)

There are many things that rattle the poor narrator, beginning with the letter of invitation to the House of Usher. If native intelligence is a first defense, his powers of observation and his agility with language have served him well—so far. But he is most troubled by that which, classically, should offer more consolation than terror, and that is Roderick Usher's guitar. What troubles him is the exchange between Usher and the instrument, the transformation of his old friend into someone he recognizes less and less. After placing Madeline, Roderick's twin sister, in the family vault, and for days her name remaining "unmentioned," the narrator makes a hopeless

attempt to comfort his friend and offer distraction. “We painted,” he says, “and read together; or I listened to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar” (Mabbott 2.404).

The guitar in modern times has been known to scream, howl, even weep, but there is more going on in this tale than mere hyperbole or an anthropomorphic exercise in flattery. Earlier, when listing some of the effects of Roderick’s “morbid acuteness of the senses” (2.403), there was one item purposely omitted, that of sound, of which the narrator says, “there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him [Roderick] with horror.” The “morbid condition” of Usher’s auditory nerve was of such severity that it made “all music intolerable with the exception of certain effects of stringed instruments” (2.406). Of the many things that torment Roderick, the one thing that does not torment him is a particular style of playing on the guitar and at a particular register on the strings, the “narrow limits to which he confined himself . . . that gave birth, in great measure, to the fantastic character of his performances.”

In a 2022 study of neurodiversity and the House of Usher, Manuel Herrero-Puertas, addressing those “narrow limits,” asserts that Roderick Usher’s way with a guitar suggests behavioral characteristics of autism. Citing Thelonius Monk, “the paradigmatic autistic composer” (14), who was known to take a single musical motif and tirelessly and with meticulous care work it over and over, wringing from it what musical variations he hears, Herrero-Puertas writes, “like Monk zeroing in on melodic minutiae, Roderick’s ‘performances’ hinge on ‘the narrow limits to which he thus confined himself upon the guitar.’” These “narrow limits” are mirrored in another work of art, a small painting the narrator refers to as “One of the phantasmagoric conceptions of my friend” (Mabbott 2.405):

> A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain

> accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor.

This image reflects not only Roderick's own "melodic minutiae" (Herrero-Puertas 14) but the details—the "long rectangular vault" (Mabbott 2.405), the "low wall," with "no torch," no "outlet"—reflect the interior of a coffin: narrow, like the limits within which he plays, the "flood of intense rays" (2.406) suggesting life within. Part of the escalation of Roderick's torment is having put his twin sister in one of the family vaults, thinking her dead though she was not. Because of the "narrow limits" of his playing field, this episode adds an uncanny dimension to the phrase "speaking guitar" (2.404), as if it were capable of exercising a divination of its own. On the question of autism, the closest equivalent in Poe's time was a species of madness, the best language for which medical science could muster was something akin to Benjamin Rush's assertion that "Talents for eloquence, poetry, music and painting, and uncommon ingenuity in several of the mechanical arts, are often evolved in this state of madness" (153).

Roderick's command of the instrument is savant-like, by a poetry of its own, capable of Delphic subtleties as suggested, his trancelike flight able to seduce his friend into a trancelike response.

> And thus, as a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit, the more bitterly did I perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom. (Mabbott 2.404-05)

What the narrator implies is that by virtue of what he hears he is admitted "more reservedly into the recesses of his [Roderick's] spirit" (2.405), that is as much to say that music possesses powers of penetration unknown to other forms of art, a channel into that remote innerworld of

existence, where silences kept and protected are known to surrender their secrets. This is, in part, what Walter Pater refers to in his dictum that "All art constantly aspires to the condition of music" (143), that it aspires to *that* degree of reach or penetration. Baudelaire, in his "New Notes on Edgar Allan Poe," writes the following, and in terms inspired by Poe:

> It is at the same time by poetry and through poetry, by and through music that the soul glimpses the splendors beyond the tomb; and when an exquisite poem brings us to the verge of tears, those tears are not the proof of excessive pleasure; they are rather the evidence of an aroused melancholy, of a condition of nerves, of a nature which has been exiled amid the imperfect and which would like to take possession immediately, on this very earth, of a revealed paradise" (103).

In the biblical account of King Saul, when he is rejected by God declines into madness because "an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him" (*King James Version*, 1 Sam. 16:14). His servants urge him to "seek out a man, who is a cunning player on an harp" (16:16), convinced that when he plays for the king, he will be well. They sought out David of Bethlehem and took him before the king. "David took a harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him" (16:23). Usher's guitar provides, therefore, a kind of passage to those "recesses of his spirit" (Mabbott 2.405). What alarmed the poor narrator as well, was the performance visage, that is, beholding a man unknown to him at that moment, a musician so focused, so isolated, so tuned to his instrument and by the fine taut wire of genius that could take him that far inside, lost, as the player was, to anything, any stimulus in the world directly around him. The guitar was Usher's retreat, the one escape from the horror of life at home, his dependence on the instrument being the one bead of light that the desperate man so fervidly seeks out note by note, phrase by phrase, his musical instincts and sensibilities locked in, so to speak, by a profound focus suggesting Hererro-Puertas's hypothesis very likely. The instrument is, in one sense, a mere flotation device, a plank of rotted wood to the drowning,

Usher's blind grab to affect his own glimpse of "the splendors beyond the tomb" as Baudelaire suggests in the passage above.

In another, deeper sense, because music is liquid, to a sophisticated player like Usher this liquidity can initiate a form of somnambulance, a kind of floating, a release from gravity that ironically accompanies extreme depths of concentration not uncommon to musicians. This liquidity will be expounded further in a treatment of "Ulalume" in the next chapter. Either way, in those moments the narrator-friend felt the depth of his own aloneness and detachment from his old companion. Roderick's improvisations, as it is with most master musician's (poets too), is no longer a conscious effort but chiefly unconscious. Not to mention that the narrator is listening to his friend "as if in a dream" (Mabbott 2.404). This is where years of investment in an instrument pays off, years of practice, of deep listening, of rote exercises, of training the memory in the small musculature of the hands, all consequent of, as the narrator muses, "a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties, of musical science" (2.399). Such saturation of time with the instrument, penetrating its secrets, conversation after conversation, invites mastery, not to mention the metaphysical dividends of music proper. Roderick Usher learned to cooperate not only with the instrument, but with the stranger inside him, the instrument merely making the introduction.

WHERE THE BEST SOUND IS

The epigraph of "The Fall of the House of Usher" by De Béranger—"Son cœur est un luth suspendu; / Sitôt qo'on le touche il résonne" may be translated "His heart is a suspended lute / As soon as it is touched; it responds." Considering that this tale is a study in collapse, that Poe chose those two lines by De Béranger as the sign above the door, so to speak, is curious,

granting, as it seems to do, Roderick's guitar centrality as a motif. The word "suspended" suggests anticipation, suspense, even tension, as in a liminal space. Due to the pull of its strings, the top of an acoustic guitar is under tremendous pressure at all times. In agreement with natural laws, the air inside a guitar has to move to make sound, all parts calibrated to an exact physics, engineered as each part is to resonate agreeably together, down to the glue that binds them—a luthier's version of Poe's unity of effect. It is the relay, the shuttle of energy (in the form of vibrations, waves) between the player, the strings, and the wood that generates sound. The specific trajectory starts from where the strings are plucked, picked, or strummed, proceeding then to the bridge that connects the strings to the top of a guitar, then to the top, which moves the air inside the guitar forcing it out of the sound hole. For modern guitars, even with light gauge strings the top has to endure tension that may exceed more than 150 pounds, and for the life of the guitar, which, with well-made guitars could easily mean over a century. What is mystifying is that the top of an acoustic guitar is only about 0.125 inches deep. Some form of bracing underneath the top, therefore, is necessary. Evolution of the guitar has taught that a thin top and light but strategically placed bracing generates the best sound. Antebellum guitars, the kind that would have been played by Virginia Poe or Roderick Usher, were strung with processed strands (strings) made from the intestines of sheep or cattle, comparable to today's classical (nylon string) guitars which means the tension would be closer to one hundred pounds or so of pressure. Either way, if the top is not sufficiently braced, due to basic physics it would eventually collapse and splinter due to the intense pull of the strings. In the long evolution of guitar making, one of the greatest challenges has been to find and address that delicate balance between the pull of the strings and the top of a guitar. The quality of sound depends on it.

The guitar is unique among stringed instruments for its physics, mainly due to its flat top. The string pressure of a violin is between 40 and 60 lbs. On a cello, up to 100 to 120 lbs. These orchestral instruments are made with a different architecture, subject to different physics, that is, different dispersal patterns of vibrations. At the bridge on a violin or cello the wood on the top is the thinnest, comparable to a guitar, but due to the arched shape of the top its thickness is graduated, that is, it becomes thicker the farther the distance from the bridge. A guitar can be made with an arched top as in jazz guitars and some acoustic models, but the wood on the top is much thicker than the flattop models. Roderick Usher's guitar would have been more of a parlor guitar, much like the C. F. Martin Stauffer model, made in 1833 [see fig. 1]. A note of interest, the C. F. Martin Guitar Company was founded in New York City in 1833, C. F. Martin having immigrated to the United States from Mark Neukirshen, Saxony (Germany). The company eventually moved to Nazareth, Pennsylvania around 1840, but when Poe lived in New York the company did business at 196 Hudson Street, in an area known today as Tribeca. Christian Frederick Martin IV, the current Executive Chairman, once said an acoustic guitar should be built "so that it's on the verge of self-destruction; that's where the best sound is" (qtd. in *Acoustic Guitar Forum*). The guitar lives, therefore, as the artist often does, as Roderick Usher does, and who is not to say, Poe

Fig. 1: 1833 Stauffer Model Guitar

himself, in that liminal space between saturation and collapse, between ecstasy and ruin at all times—where the best music is.

Again, whether Poe was aware of this unique property of guitar architecture or not, it adds a more complete image of the instrument's mirror-like reflection of Roderick Usher, who, by the signs of stress—his fragility, the thinness and gossamer quality of his hair, the tension in his voice, the crippling anxiety, his chronic bad health, his hypersensitivity—portend his ultimate collapse. Suspended, indeed. If there is a metaphorical likeness between him and the house as Wilbur strongly suggests, there is, therefore, an invisible fissure running down the middle of Roderick Usher's soul. It is significant to note that before a guitar top implodes under pressure, the first noticeable indication of that implosion is a visible crack in the top, and sometimes a bowing or bellying outward. Unmentioned, but with no less metaphorical weight is the emptiness inside the instrument and the hole in its center from where the music comes. Roderick is as much the instrument he plays with its Damoclean suspension, as he is the house he plays in.

THE HAUNTED PALACE

The dominant motif in this poem, indicative as it is of the House of Usher, is the lost paradise—the notion that Eden is temporary, that its Adam was corruptible in mind, and paradise would slip from him and his, that the garden will, in time, be overrun, weeded, fall into ruin and decay, and, like its temporary inhabitants, return to dust. It is interesting to note that Roderick wrote this "rhapsody," as the narrator referred to it, chronicling the ruin of the House of Usher, with its "tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne" (Mabbott 2.406), anticipating the slow decent of his own mind, a mind at war with itself, the "civil war" Wilbur refers to.

> The domain of the monarch Thought, in these final stanzas, is disrupted by civil war, and in consequence everything alters for the worse. The valley becomes barren, like the

> domain of Roderick Usher; the eye-like windows of the palace are no longer "luminous," but have become "red-litten"—they are like the bloodshot eyes of a madman or a drunkard. As for the mouth of our allegorized man, it is now "pale" rather than "pearl and ruby," and through it come no sweet Echoes, as before, but the wild laughter of a jangling and discordant mind. (Thompson 813)

Starting with the title of the ballad, the residence is no more a house than Roderick Usher is a man of common stature or importance. That it is referred to as "palace" suggests, as it should, the palatial, that enthroned in such a mind would be the high seat of thought itself, the mind being a paradise, the palatial grounds an Eden, lush, verdant, vital, and very green.

> In the greenest of our valleys
> By good angels tenanted,
> Once a fair and stately palace –
> Radiant palace – reared its head.
> In the monarch Thought's dominion –
> It stood there!
> Never seraph spread a pinion
> Over fabric half so fair! (Mabbott 2.406)

The intellectual life of the house and its namesake was once lucid, a house where the "good angels" of thought, rule, justice, and deliberation lived and held court. The one caveat of this Eden is found in the last two lines of stanza 1: "Never seraph spread a pinion / Over fabric half so fair!" This line presents a challenge to heavenly beings in the same manner line 9 of "Annabel Lee" does—"But we loved with a love that was more than love" (1.476), the love that rivals the love above all loves, the love of God, stirring envy among the angels.

> Wanderers in that happy valley,
> Through two luminous windows, saw
> Spirits moving musically
> To a lute's well-tunéd law,
> Round about a throne where, sitting,
> Porphyrogene!
> In state his glory well befitting,
> The ruler of the realm was seen. (2.407)

The first four stanzas create the legend of the Usher line, Roderick being the latest of that line. It would have been handed down to him from all the fathers, all the Roderick Ushers that preceded him, the empurpled, hence the nonce word "Porphyrogene!" (those born into royalty; the child of a ruling monarch).

The general scholarship on this embedded poem suggests that the "Banners yellow, glorious, golden / On its roof" (2.406), describes the hair of Usher, assuming Roderick, the "two luminous windows," through which others "saw / Spirits moving musically, / To a lute's well-tunéd law" (2.407) as the eyes of Usher. Behind the eyes, was a mind well-tuned and a nerve well-strung, musical images suggesting mathematical precision of thought and movement. The "fair palace door," the mouth of Usher, "Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing, / And sparkling evermore, / A troop of Echoes whose sweet duty / Was but to sing, / In the voices of surpassing beauty / The wit and wisdom of their king." Roderick is living in the dark end of the legend, and he knows it. His song confesses it. The stresses are too taut, the top cannot hold, the crack imperious.

In a letter to Rufus Griswold 29 May 1841, Poe mentioned the ballad. "The identity in the title is striking," he writes, "for by the Haunted Palace I mean to imply a mind haunted by phantoms – a disordered brain" (*Letters* 1.161). Considering the volta at stanza 5, the question might be asked: are the "evil things in robes of sorrow" demonic as McAdams suggested? Are they vengeful angels (emissaries, servants of God) who could not let the challenge stand, the love-that-was-more-than-love trope, the happiness-that-was-more-than-happiness, the verdant-that-was-more-than-verdant of the enthroned palace and its environs? Either way, the assault was successful. "But evil things in robes of sorrow, / Assailed the monarch's high estate" (Mabbott 2.407). That is, the "evil things" infested the collective mind of Usher (and the Ushers before

him) and all that might have bloomed from it, by generational decay, the once proud visage fallen into decomposition and senescence.

> And travelers, now, within that valley,
> Through the encrimsoned windows see.
> Vast forms that move fantastically
> To a discordant melody,
> While, like a ghastly rapid river,
> Through the pale door
> A hideous throng rush out forever
> And laugh – but smile no more.

The laughter has turned from merriment to the demoniacal. The arc of this poetic narrative provides demonstration of saturation, the too-muchness of the House of Usher, of the Usher line, inclining toward its ultimate collapse, where the tale gets its title.

Chapter 4 — “Deep Into That Darkness Peering”: *The Raven and Other Poems*

The polish of Poe’s latter poems was hard-earned. With continuous revision and experimentation, with experience itself, one death upon another, the theme he had returned to again and again had matured beneath his hand. Therefore, when his wife, Virginia, showed signs of tuberculosis, the art that had been fashioned around so frighteningly identical motifs and for so long, were poised to achieve a measure of refinement and aesthetic consequence that Poe was both prepared and unprepared for. Unprepared by virtue of emotional mutiny, of what it took from him. But genius, resolute and unrelenting, had long made preparations, awaiting the catalyst event. The readiness is all. According to “The Philosophy of Composition,” the creation of “The Raven” had much to do with the slow erosion of the paradise he had created or imagined for himself and Virginia, their little Eden, the one true home he had known stripped from him, and not in “one fell swoop” but by installments, a harrowing five-year period that preceded her death, the period within which he created his most famous poem. An impossible state, he was writing “The Raven” in one room, while Virginia was dying in the next. Again, calamity’s profound effect on genius. In a letter to George Eveleth, he writes that it was “the horrible never-ending oscillation between hope & despair which I could not longer have endured without the total loss of reason” (*Letters* 2.356).

> Six years ago, a wife, whom I loved as no man ever loved before, ruptured a blood-vessel in singing. Her life was despaired of. I took leave of her forever & underwent all the agonies of her death. She recovered partially and I again hoped. At the end of a year the vessel broke again — I went through precisely the same scene. Again in about a year afterward. Then again — again — again & even once again at varying intervals. Each time I felt all the agonies of her death — and at each accession of the disorder I loved her more dearly & clung to her life with more desperate pertinacity. But I am constitutionally sensitive — nervous in a very unusual degree. I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity.

Virginia's death brought an end, what Poe referred to as "a cure" to torment or at least torment of a kind—the bottomless drink, the horrid drifts of insanity. "I had indeed abandoned all hope of a permanent cure when I found one in the *death* of my wife." This meant, however, that Poe was once again alone, a state he considered intolerable. William Carlos Williams writes that "When she [Virginia] died, there was nothing left. In his despair he had nowhere to turn" (232). This letter to Eveleth possesses, like many of his letters do, a "poetry" of its own. It contains Poe's quintessential theme and its motifs: the death of a beautiful woman, the love that was more than love, the ideality, ["a wife, whom I loved as no man ever loved before"], the bereaved lover, the lost paradise, the impossibility, the desire to be with the departed in the supernal, and a more refined strain of melancholy—"In the death of what was my life, then, I receive a new but – O God! how melancholy an existence" (*Letters* 2.356).

While this event cannot explain the motifs of his earlier poems, as mentioned, their shapes had been long cultivated. With Virginia's death his verse grew lyrical spine, and with it the slow emergence of a new, or second, Poe, the indication of which being the poems from "The Raven" forward, many of them drawn from Poe's musical reserves. The poems in this chapter share the gloss of Poe's tragic best—"The Raven," "Ulalume," "The Sleeper," and select others.

MANY A FLIRT AND FLUTTER

"With 'The Raven' Edgarpoe hit the jackpot," Hoffman writes. (79). George Graham [*Graham's Magazine*], Poe's former employer, refused publication—at first. "Graham, take a bow," Hoffman adds, "You goofed." As it began to gain traction, Graham relented. Of course, he did. "Once the poem was out, it was widely reprinted, imitated, and parodied. Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe was now a household name. Forevermore." "The Philosophy of Composition" is an exposition

on the writing of "The Raven," the essay in which Poe makes his declaration about the death of a beautiful woman being "the most poetical topic in the world." "It is my design," Poe writes, "to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition — that the work proceeded step by step, to its completion, with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem" (Thompson 676-7). This was his motive, though Hoffman has another opinion: "I won't go so far as to say that he *wrote* 'The Philosophy of Composition' in order to make George Graham eat raven, but that may well have been one of his motives" (80). This is Poe the mathematician, the rhapsodist, the architect, the mechanic, the narrative strategist, the cool scientist, perhaps the evangelist, the marketeer. Music, however, among his more primitive instincts, and its cool science of meter, is mathematical. Every measure in a score has to be mathematically precise, that is, if there are four beats to a measure, those four beats have to be accounted for within each measure and the divisions of a single beat are numerous. It was Poe's rich musicality that earned him the name "The Jingleman," from Emerson, a statement that under a certain light says much more about Emerson than it does Poe. It is with this mathematical precision, if he is given the benefit of the doubt, that he composed "The Raven."

Many of the motifs observed in this study are present in this poem. The first stanza seems absent of them, but its function is to prepare the reader with a set piece, adding its contribution to context which is made clearer in stanza 2. This version of "The Raven" is Mabbot [T].

> Once upon a midnight dreary, while I ponder'd weak and weary
> Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore –
> While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
> As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door –
> "'Tis some visitor I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door –
> Only this and nothing more."
>
> Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;

And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow; – vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow – sorrow for the lost
Lenore –
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name
Lenore –
Nameless *here* for evermore. (1.365)

In this second stanza, the bereaved desires from his studies a "surcease of sorrow – sorrow for the Lost Lenore." Lenore is the beautiful dead woman, the "rare and radiant maiden" suggestive of the narrator's enshrinement of her whom the angels have named and possibly envy as Poe's angels are wont to do (they seem more Greek than Hebrew). Here, as in "Annabel Lee," is a faint reflection of the Dante-Beatrice motif—heavenly creatures wanting the "rare and radiant maiden" for themselves. Kopley writes that "Although Poe contends that the process of composition of the poem was ultrarational, the motive for the poem seems to have been unreasoning sorrow" (Hayes 194). The sorrow is genuine, formidable, though, curiously, terror is the superior of the two. Once again, implied by the dead beloved and the bereaved lover is the lost paradise.

While "The Raven" incorporates the principal motifs, they are secondary to the effect Poe hopes to achieve in the language, and that is horror, that the reader/listener feels what the poor student feels. Poe takes his time and develops this fear incrementally over the course of many stanzas, the heart rate of the bereaved (perhaps even the reader) increasing with each one, step by maddening step. In the following stanza [5], the bereaved is being swept up in the vortex of his apprehensions, transforming, as they are, into fear, having dreamed "dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before," another example of Poe's particular hyperbolic construction, akin to "we loved a love that was more than love" which is never mentioned. The alliteration hypnotic, chantlike.

> Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
> Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;
> But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,
> And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "Lenore?"
> This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, "Lenore!"—
> Merely this and nothing more. (Mabbott 1.365-66)

Melancholy, of course, is the chief tone, burdened, as it is, with the weight of profound anxiety against which the bereaved shrinks and shudders with each separate noise. In most of Poe's poems that include the motifs as designated in this study, there is an absence of the demonic, the exception being "The Raven," where the demonic is plumed in sable.

> Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
> In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore;
> Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
> But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door—
> Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door—
> Perched, and sat, and nothing more.
>
> Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
> By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
> "Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou," I said, "art sure no craven,
> Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the Nightly shore—
> Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore!"
> Quoth the Raven "Nevermore." (1.366)

Though not stated, while a desire to be with the beloved in the afterlife (the supernal) may be on the mind of the bereaved, he is distracted with a matter of much more gravity. Due to the slow strangulation of his conscience by the terror that has overwhelmed it, he finds himself in the unspeakable divide between divinity and his mounting suspicion that angels had sent the creature by that same divinity to torment him, not unlike the demon sent by God to torment Saul. "But the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD troubled him" (*King James Version,* 1 Samuel 16:14).

> Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
> Swung by seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
> "Wretch," I cried, "thy God hath sent thee – by these angels he hath sent thee

> Respite – respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore;
> Quaff, of quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!"
> Quoth the Raven "Nevermore." (Mabbott 1.368)

In the Judeo-Christian Bible, ravens were used by God for certain purposes, one of which was a reconnaissance mission for Noah. "And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made: And he sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth" (*King James Version,* Genesis 8:6-7). Secondly, ravens were commanded to feed the prophet Elijah. "And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there" (1 Kings 17:4). The bereaved and terrified narrator addresses the creature twice as a prophet and a "thing of evil." The narrator's countenance and his voice reveal a mounting desperation, crying out in line 89, "Is there – is there balm in Gilead? – tell me – tell me, I implore!" / Quoth the Raven "Nevermore." Is there no medication for this sorrow? This "balm" is a reference to Jeremiah 8:22 in the King James Bible, which reads: "Is there no balm in Gilead: is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" Darren Harris-Fein asserts that the narrator starts to entertain "doubt about whether she [Lenore] lives on in the afterlife, whether they might one day be reunited, or whether instead her death means extinction, both of her life and of the speaker's hopes" (312). Of course, the raven is not slow with a response.

> "Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!
> By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
> Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
> It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
> Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore."
> Quoth the Raven "Nevermore." (Mabbott 1.368)

In the penultimate stanza, the bereaved narrator's terror having reached its highest pitch, his shrieking hard appeal to the creature, though it will prove flat, shows force, though it comes

too late. “Leave no black plume,” “Leave my loneliness unbroken!” He cries as the lines approach crisis (saturation). *Get thee behind me, Satan*. “Poe’s raven,” Hoffman writes, “tells us that this, the known life, is an unmitigated disaster, a spell of suffering, loss, sorrow, of longing almost unbearable for the bliss he can almost remember, for the obliteration he yearns for as much as he dreads” (333). And the helpless, bitterly defeated—“Take thy beak from out my heart . . .”—is the very soul of the poem. This entire stanza is spoken in high-pitched exclamation seasoned with terror and desperation, having reached crisis (saturation). The last line is spoken in a dying fall (collapse), in this case the serenity following crisis, the release of hard tension that belongs to the bird alone, who says, essentially, “No more, no more, no more.” With perhaps all of Poe’s verse, but most particularly these latter, more theatrical poems, performance is interpretation, the flower, the thing itself.

> “Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked, upstarting _
> Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!
> Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
> Leave my loneliness unbroken! – quit the bust above my door!
> Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!”
> Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.” (Mabbott 1.369)

The cycle of saturation and collapse is easily and sufficiently demonstrated in “The Raven.” The stanzas slowly ascend in power and degree of fright and intensity, first setting the scene (context), then entering a form of doubtful negotiation, testing his failing optimism against the presence of a darkness he does not understand nor has power to resist. The word “Nevermore,” like the hissing of the blade in “The Pit and the Pendulum,” becoming more and more menacing, louder in a figurative sense, with each iteration. Then the deflation (collapse) by a horror-born clarity that there is no bargaining in the bird any more than there is pity, redemption, or salvation, His despair, like the bird, will remain ever-present, “emblematical of Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance” (Thompson 684).

A PASSIONATE SADNESS

One of the best representatives of a lost paradise is ironically titled "To One in Paradise." In her review of *The Raven and Other Poems* [1845], Margaret Fuller writes that other than "The Raven," she is not impressed with the other poems in that collection, that there is something unfinished about them, saying "they are all fragments — fyttes upon the lyre, almost all of which leave us something to desire or demand" (Fuller). She adds however that the exception is "To One in Paradise." With this poem in mind, she says Poe's verses "breathe a passionate sadness, relieved sometimes by touches very lovely and tender." "The Haunted Palace," mentioned in Fuller's review (addressed in Chapter 3), is another of Poe's poems where the central theme is the loss of paradise. In *In the American Grain*, the last words in William Carlos Williams's essay on Poe, framed as more of an afterthought, is a single-line paragraph that says, "The best poem is *To One in Paradise*" (233). The following is Mabbott's [N] version.

> Thou wast that all to me, love,
> For which my soul did pine —
> A green isle in the sea, love,
> A fountain and a shrine
> All wreathed with fairy fruits and flowers
> And all the flowers were mine. (1.214)

In this first stanza, the poet declares in the past tense what his love was to him, all that he ached for. She was a paradise, "A green isle in the sea," reflecting paradisal seclusion, a faint echo of John of Gaunt's monologue on "This other Eden, demi-paradise, . . . This precious stone set in a silver sea" (*R2* 2.1.43, 46), including the high tone of its melancholy, not yet darkened or despairing. Thematically, from the opening stanza the voice is that of a bereaved lover remembering a woman now absent, and the paradise lost with that absence, an enshrinement celebrated with the flower of language, the lush foliage of memory "All wreathed with fairy

fruits and flowers / And all the flowers were mine," including the impossibility of being with the departed. The volta arrives suddenly with the second verse. "Overcast" suggests overthrow, dimming of light by a cloud, and the deflation of its tone—the poet's numbness, his unbelief, his wordless suspension. The third stanza portends the "Nevermore" of the raven—"No more – no more – no more," causing, as it does, a kind of paralysis of nature itself.

> Ah, dream too bright to last!
> Oh, starry Hope! that didst arise
> But to be overcast!
> A voice from out the Future cries
> "On! on!" — but o'er the Past
> (Dim gulf!) my spirit hovering lies
> Mute, motionless, aghast! (Mabbott 1.214)

The future beckons, "A voice from out the Future cries," in superb musical voice, but the speaker stalls (an ellipsis disguised as an en dash), the memory of paradise having affected paralysis. The remaining stanzas descend as into a dream (the dim gulf). Reality thickens and slowly goes dark.

> For, alas! alas! with me
> The light of Life is o'er!
> No more — no more — no more
> (Such language holds the solemn sea
> To the sands upon the shore)
> Shall bloom the thunder-blasted tree,
> Or the stricken eagle soar!
>
> And all my days are trances,
> And all my nightly dreams
> Are where thy dark eye glances,
> And where thy footstep gleams —
> In what ethereal dances
> By what eternal streams. (1.214-15)

The poet prefers, in these last lines, the opiate of dreams to the "No more" outside them, that stares back at him, filled as those dreams are with the unbearable lightness of her presence, the gleam of her "light"-footed steps whose liquid movement seems to dance (by no common or earthly step).

AND I AM DRUNK WITH LOVE OF THE DEAD

Significant among his poetic names, and Poe having acquired a sophistication in Greek, the name "Lenore" is a form of "Eleanor," derived from the ancient Greek "Helenē" or "Helen," all of which mean "torch or firebrand" (Pemberton 6). "No other poem of Poe's," writes Mabbott, "gave him so much trouble as 'Lenore'" (1.330). Or its reader. It is not the easiest poem to follow. The bones of "Lenore" the poem were first composed in "A Pæan" in 1831. As "Lenore," it was published in 1843, then revised again in 1844, a revision some critics wished Poe had not made. "Never in American literature . . . was such a fountain of melody flung into the air as when 'Lenore' first appeared in 'The Pioneer'; and never did fountain so drop as when Poe rearranged it in its present form" (qtd. in Mabbott 1.330). A "balladic dialogue" (McGann 185), published in 1843, "Lenore" was written during the season Poe had begun agonizing over his wife's bout with tuberculosis. This may explain the bitterness in the voice of the narrator, a bitterness or aggravation absent in its earlier 1831 form, "A Pæan," which Mabbott refers to as "a kind of preliminary draft" (1.337) of "Lenore," though the name mentioned in "A Pæan" is not Lenore but "Helen."

Motifs include the death of a beautiful woman—Lenore, "the queenliest dead that ever died so young" (Mabbott 1.336), now in heaven, is enshrined in the words of the bereaved yet aggravated lover-narrator-defender, aggravated and slanderous as he is toward the falseness of her friends. If he sings, they cry, it should be a solemn song so "the dead may feel no wrong!" This suggestion offends the narrator. "No dirge will I upraise, / But waft the angel on her flight with a Pæan of old days!" A pæan is a song of triumph, which he prefers over gravity (in the Shakespearean sense). Charity McAdams writes, "More than a too wordy, too material, too

earthly insult to Lenore's spirit, the 'song' that Lenore's false friends suggest becomes associated with that which actually impedes her from transcendence" (117), something that the narrator cannot tolerate. The following lines are from "A Pæan" [B].

> Or, that my tone should be
> Tun'd to such a solemn song,
> So mournfully—so mournfully,
> That the dead may feel no wrong.
>
> But she is gone above,
> With young Hope at her side,
> And I am drunk with love
> Of the dead, who is my bride. (Mabbott 1.206)

Mabbott writes that "A Pæan" is "weakest piece in Poe's Poems of 1831" (1.204). Even so, it has significant, if not transparent, moments, as in the passage above "And I am drunk with love / Of the dead, who is my bride."

> Her friends are gazing on her,
> And on her gaudy bier,
> And weep! – oh! to dishonor
> Her beauty with a tear!
>
> They loved her for her wealth –
> And they hated her for her pride –
> But she grew in feeble health,
> And they love her – that she died. (1.206)

The en dash between those last two phrases is a cue to performance, suggesting the cynicism it is laced with. The beloved is also in the supernal, enshrined in the memory of the narrator. "But she is gone above, / With young Hope at her side, / And I am drunk with love / Of the dead, who is my bride." Again, his hope of paradise dies with his beloved. In her death, she is finally taken from her fiends (a word related to and may have some play with "friends") "To join the all-hallowed mirth / Of more than thrones in heaven."

"A Pæan" is to "Lenore" as "Irene" is to "The Sleeper," that is, essentially a revision, hopefully a successful one. The "Irene" and "The Sleeper" complex can boast success. In a letter to George Eveleth 15 December 1846, Poe writes the following:

> Your appreciation of "The Sleeper" delights me. In the higher qualities of poetry, it is better than "The Raven" — but there is not one man in a million who could be brought to agree with me in this opinion. "The Raven", of course, is far the better as a work of art — but in the true basis of all art "The Sleeper" is superior. (*Letters* 2.332)

Curiously, the addition of "not one man in a million who could be brought to agree" perhaps signals a double entendre, meaning that to Poe the poem is a "sleeper," that is, "Something whose quality or value proves to be greater than was generally expected; a 'dark horse'" ("Sleeper," def. 1.6). The *Oxford English Dictionary* does not record the first usage of the word until 1892, so it may be unlikely that Poe used it in that sense, though it is not impossible that he did. As savvy as Poe's senses were, not to mention his freakishly well-tuned ear, "sleeper" could easily be vernacular of early nineteenth-century gaming or gambling culture that might have eluded the attention of the OED. It would certainly satisfy Poe's elevated twin sense of justice and wit.

To Eveleth, Poe adds that he had written "Irene" as a boy. When compared to the seasoned [J] version he renamed "The Sleeper," the difference between the two evolutionary states become obvious. The former has, on occasion, an impulsiveness suggestive of youth, an almost frenetic movement about it, especially when compared to the mature [J] version. The latter has no "icy worms" or "vampyre-winged pannels [sic]" (Mabbott 1.185). Consider the opening of both: the slightly uneven "'T is now (so sings the soaring moon) / Midnight in the sweet month of June," [A] compared to the smooth iambic tetrameter of "At midnight in the month of June, / I stand beneath the mystic moon" [J], the rhyme throughout smoother, more even. Poe continued to revise this poem until 1849, the year he died. In 1841, he changed the

name from “Irene” to “The Sleeper.” The name “Irene” suggests serenity, peace, though the poem by that name is not serene, at least not in the way its inheritor is. Serenity, in “The Sleeper,” unique in Poe, is the enveloping mood of the poem, similar in character to the serenity of “Annabel Lee,” and though the latter is a shade darker, both strike the same tranquil notes—the drowse of midnight, the sound of a lonely surf in one, the benign low-grade hum of nature in the other, windows open to the night. “A conscious slumber seems to take, / And would not, for the world, awake. / All Beauty sleeps! — and lo! where lies / Irene, with her Destinies!” (Mabbott 1.187) The lines share a quietude and resolve of death, “the soft, voluptuous, opiate shades” (Whitman 633), to borrow description from Whitman. The night of the poem is tranquil, nature kind and pleasant, “The wanton airs, from the tree-top, / Laughingly through the lattice drop” (Mabbott 1.187). The voice of the lover is tranquil. His sorrow is swallowed up in beauty, opiated by liberal nature that surrounds him, though he is alone.

Concerning motifs, the beautiful Irene is dead. The narrator is the bereaved, but his voice is not wounded, and the latter portion of the poem he turns to prayer. There is an absence of the demonic, even as there is an absence of jealous or vengeful angels. “The Sleeper,” is a lovely hymn to the beloved dead. “The lady sleeps! Oh, may her sleep, / Which is enduring, so be deep! / Heaven have her in its sacred keep! / This chamber changed for one more holy, / This bed for one more melancholy” (1.187-88). The narrator’s melancholy does not cripple him, retard, or choke his words. The tranquility lies not just in description, but in the language of the poem itself, a serenity mingled with a kind of optimism, again, rare in Poe. Line 3—“An opiate vapour, dewy dim, / Exhales from out her golden rim” recalls the voice of Hecate in *Macbeth* but without the conspiracies of her curse. “Upon the corner of the moon / There hangs a vap’rous drop profound, / I’ll catch it ere it come to ground” (*Mac.* 3.5.23-29). “And, softly dripping drop by

drop / Upon the quiet mountain top, / Steals drowsily and musically / Into the universal valley," (Mabbott 1.187) suggests the opiate suffusing the valley, the drowse folding gently into forgetfulness ("Looking like Lethe, see!"). "The rosemary nods upon the grave; / The lily lolls upon the wave; / Wrapping the fog about its breast, / The ruin moulders, into rest." A lovely paean to tranquil death disguised here as sleep, this poem shares the quiet triumph of "Annabel Lee."

COLD MOONLIGHT WITCHERY

"Ulalume" [1847] is one of the most mystifying poems in the Poe canon, one that evokes a remarkably insightful species of commentary, meet for a remarkable poem. The *Providence Journal,* 22 November 1848, referred to it as "a curiosity, and a delicious one, we think" (qtd. in Mabbot 1.413). Mabbott, commenting astutely on its musicality, writes that its "vocal music by itself conveys one emotion after another, like the lapping of a river against a shore – steady, quiet, and resistless. It must be read aloud or sounded to the 'inner ear,' and indeed it was composed for recitation" (1.409). Then there is the monstrously delightful description of the poem by the editor of the New York *Literary World*, E. A. Duykinck, who writes that "Ulalume" has about it "a certain cold moonlight witchery" (202). Of course, a poem written as daringly as Poe wrote this poem has its detractors, among the more colorful is Aldous Huxley, who, essentially accusing "Ulalume" of bloating, comparing its opulence to one wearing a diamond ring on each finger, referred to Poe's "walloping dactylic metre," which, he adds, "is all too musical. Poetry ought to be musical, but musical with tact, subtly and variously" (Huxley Archives). To Hoffman, the lines "lollop," as in "Ten lolloping lines to say 'I roamed with my Soul when my heart was as turbulent as a volcano" (73). "Here once, through an alley Titanic, /

Of cypress, I roamed with my Soul— / Of cypress, with Psyche, my Soul / These were the days when my heart was volcanic / As the scoriac rivers that roll" (Mabbott 1.416).

Concerning motifs, within all its atmospheric effects, at the poem's center is the deceased "Ulalume" somewhere in the thickets. Adrift within those thickets is the bereaved lover whose description suggests a lost or abandoned paradise, the sear and yellow leaf of impossibility suffused throughout.

> The skies they were ashen and sober;
> The leaves they were crispéd and sere –
> The leaves they were withering and sere –
> It was night in the lonesome October
> Of my most immemorial year.

The gloom is magnificent, the fallenness of the landscape reflecting the narrator's despair, a grief of such magnitude he is able to describe the landscape with precision and detail, though his memory is mute, benumbed, suspended, the poor creature not even realizing where he is at, what time of the year it is, that he has been here before, or what awaits him at the end of this ramble. Or as Hoffman puts it, "The fact that the Self doesn't even know where he is should tell us, this ballad-singer is mental" (75). The bereaved is in a functionally somnambulant state, the blindness perhaps an unconscious exercise of emotional self-preservation, while in conversation with his soul, his other self. The David of scripture, just as agonized, spoke to his soul often as a separate being from himself. "Externalizing his soul," Kopley writes, "he indicates how grief has fractured his mental and physical state" (Cambridge 191). The poet is under a spell. It has only been a year and yet he seems lost and in need of guidance through these "ghoul haunted" woodlands where his wife, Ulalume, is entombed. He has to venture through this parched Eden, Dante with his Vergil, trying but failing to shake memory from its reticence. While "serious and sober," their thoughts were "palsied and sere [paralyzed and withered] – / Our memories were

treacherous and sere; / For we knew not the month of October / And we marked not the night of the year" (Mabbott 1.416).

In stanza 4, as morning approaches he mentions Astarte's "bediamoned crescent, / Distinct with its duplicate horn" (1.417). The horn suggests power, in this context power or persuasion over the narrator, Astarte representing romantic love, against which Psyche is suspect. Sarah Helen Whitman observes that the "geist," that is, the ghost, the phantom presence of the poem is Astarte, "the crescent star of hope and love, that after a night of horror was seen" (qtd. in Mabbott 1.414). In Byron's closet drama, *Manfred,* Astarte is the dead beloved, the figure that haunts him, the source of his torment.

> . . . by a power
> Deeper than all yet urged, a tyrant-spell,
> Which had its birth-place in a star condemn'd,
> The burning wreck of a demolish'd world,
> A wandering hell in the eternal space;
> By the strong curse which is upon my soul,
> The thought that is within me and around me,
> I do compel ye to my will. —Appear! (1.1.42-49)

Byron's Astarte is also thematically reflective—the bereaved (tortured) lover, the dead beautiful woman, the lost paradise ("the burning wreck of a demolish'd world"), the celestial nature of the name suggesting sacrality and enshrinement. Poe certainly stole from Byron, if by means of good-artists-borrow-great-artists-steal trope. Act 2 of *Manfred* is doubtless the source of Poe's 1829 poem "Alone." "From childhood's hour I have not been / As others were – I have not seen / As others saw – I could not bring / My passions from a common spring" (Mabbott 1.146).

> From my youth upwards
> My spirit walk'd not with the souls of men,
> Nor look'd upon the earth with human eyes;
> The thirst of their ambition was not mine,
> The aim of their existence was not mine;
> My joys, my griefs, my passions, and my powers,
> Made me a stranger; though I wore the form,

I had no sympathy with breathing flesh . . . (Byron 290 2.2.50-57)

It is not unlikely that Poe "borrowed" the use of Astarte for "Ulalume." Psyche, however, urged him away from the reverie, wooing him into his former trancelike somnambulance. In Byronic lore, Astarte and the tale of *Manfred* represents his forbidden and guilt-laden incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh, the name being the probable source of Poe's "Annabel Lee," though doubtful of its incestuous association. Nabokov cleverly combined the names and their inferences in *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert's first love being Annabel Leigh (Byron's first wife, Anna Isabella, was often called Annabella).

The musicality of "Ulalume" is unique in Poe, and central to this poem. While its mechanical precision, word by word, is comparable to "The Raven," its musicality is of a different character. Charity McAdams, arguing that the poem is not strictly "A Ballad" as the title suggests, adds that "Whatever his [Poe's] rhythmic and sound effects, the poem's music, in a real-world sense, does not exist" (61). Real-world song, perhaps not. Such attempts would reduce most any of Poe's more musical poems to a mawkish caricature. It is musical, however, not in the sense that meaning is subservient to sound, but in the gentle roll of the line that carries and elevates meaning in its forward movement. Like all great poets—Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley—Poe's chief organ of sense is his ear.

"Ulalume" is distinguished by its liquidity, its likeness to water, sharing its physics as it does—its movement, its autumnal features, rank and withered—as if deep under water. Poe teases with the line, mid-poem, "At the end of our path a liquescent / And nebulous lustre was born" (Mabbott 1.416). "Nebulous" is defined as "Clouded, turbid, opaque" ("Nebulous," def. 2). The density of the atmosphere, not unlike water. The words at times float, or it is possible for the words to achieve that effect, depending, of course, how one reads or performs the lines. And

these lines were written to be performed if they are to achieve that “cold moonlight witchery” of effect. In his enchanted state, the poet-narrator’s words reflect the slow liquid roll of his thoughts, oceanic, as in a dream, and it cannot help but manifest its bereavements through a turbidity of expression, that is, in an oceanic voice, as if afloat within a slow rolling current.

> I replied—"This is nothing but dreaming:
> Let us on by this tremulous light!
> Let us bathe in this crystalline light!
> Its Sybilic splendor is beaming
> With Hope and in Beauty to-night:—
> See!—it flickers up the sky through the night! (Mabbott 1.417)

Hoffman refers to the poem as a “faëry ballet,” concerning its movement, adding that “Poe’s tale can’t move any faster than the music, the music is more important than any of the words” (73).

Consider “The City in the Sea,” how in that mystical city of the dead, what its inhabitants might appear like moving about from one location to another, maneuvering through deep water, perhaps with a flowing gown trailing behind them—the floating movement, in pulses impossibly slow, without weight or gravity, ghostlike, suspended, like the language of this poem that has no obligation to time. The narrator is in no rush. He hardly knows why he is even there. The science, and rare magic of this concept is that water is the best conductor of sound, it being the truer star of “Ulalume.” The name itself is liquid, as if spoken in water. It almost gargles. An “ululation,” very fittingly, is “A howl or wail; a cry of lamentation” (“Ululation,” def. 1). Kopley addresses the names that feature the letter L: “the name of the lost love, like so many of Poe’s female characters—Annabel Lee, Eulalie, Helen, Lenore, Ligeia, Morella—favors the letter 'L'” (Hayes 200).

If one were to strike the lowest note, that is, the bass string of Roderick Usher’s guitar, and if by film that movement was captured in slow motion, it would be possible to see the string move in waves (sound vibrations are called “waves” for a reason), the slow undulations

mimicking the movement of water. Mabbott is certainly correct in his assertion that it "must be read aloud or sounded to the 'inner ear,' and indeed it was composed for recitation." This poem offers a sufficient demonstration of the difference between reading a poem and hearing it performed, and at its own pace, not the speaker's. One must submit to the voice the poem prefers and not to the rules of poetic convention, however sophisticated. A poem knows its own velocity, the speed by which the effect is most prominent, and this one takes its time. A speaker has to hear it. That is what Mabbott is referring to when he asserts that it "must be read aloud or sounded to the 'inner ear'" (1.409).

"Ulalume" presents an image of the bereaved lover's troubled inner life, with Psyche, the figurative candle of that world, as guide. The dry leaf of the woodland, the withered, the sere, the ghoulish, the tetchiness of their presence, all consequent of the heat his grief has generated—the gloom, the lack of awareness. It is only at the end of the poem, when the narrator kisses Psyche [stanza 8], and tempts her "out of her gloom," that he emerges from his former hypnosis and realizes where he is and what he has seen: "Then my heart it grew ashen and sober / As the leaves that were crispéd and sere" (1.418). In this poem, as in "The Raven," "The Bells," and "Annabel Lee," Poe proves himself master of phonetic orchestration.

A TEMPLE TO HIS SOLITUDE

"Deep in Earth"(1847) was written not long after Virginia Poe's funeral (2 February 1847). It is aphoristic, epitaphic, funereal. It has the gravity, charm, and approaches the movement and musical sobriety of an early Bob Dylan song, perhaps "It's alright, Ma (I'm only bleeding)" or "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue."

> Deep in earth my love is lying.
> And I must weep alone. (Mabbott 1.396)

This is a unique poem, with the power to surprise—another sleeper. As alluded to earlier in this study, in his youth, Poe was stricken of conscience knowing Jane Stanard was in the ground, cold, alone, unattended, unthought of. It represents one of the oldest and fundamental tropes in his poetic canon, the underside of "Men toiled at the grave in which I lay darkling" (Mabbott 2.616) from "The Colloquy of Monos and Una." Thematically, "Deep in Earth" incorporates the dead beloved, the bereaved lover, the cooled-earth melancholy that the buried dead inspire, the helplessness of impossibility, a paradise cut short, and the intolerable loneliness underneath the words.

It is the absence of lines, those yet to come, anticipated but unspoken, the hush that make this poem unique. It may want to say more, but it does not and cannot. The absence, therefore, *becomes* the poetry—the speechless, the name I cannot speak, the stricken thing that sticks in the throat. Weeping and talking are incompatible functions, both negotiating for breath. There is something else. The poem is mildly and benignly solipsistic in the sense that his grief is the reality of the poem, accented by "my love" and "I must." This solipsism is comparable to that which may be detected in "Annabel Lee," a sense that the maiden lived "with no other thought / Than to love and be loved by me" (1.477). While this study does not pretend psychoanalytic sophistication, and though this is pure speculation, it is not unreasonable, as T. S. Eliot attributed to Poe a perpetual literary adolescence, "the intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty" (335), to suggest that the character and depth of his love remains unripe, "arrested," governed by the unseasoned manner more germane or typical of youth.

> There is just that lacking which gives dignity to the mature man: a consistent view of life. . . . I am not concerned with any possible psychological or pathological explanation: it is enough for my purpose to record that the work of Poe is such as I should expect of a man of very exceptional mind and sensibility, who emotional development has been in some respect arrested at an early age. His most vivid imaginative realizations are the realization

> of a dream: significantly, the ladies in his poems and tales are always ladies lost, or ladies vanishing before they can be embraced. (335)

Perhaps because death so often intervened, his love never bloomed or had the chance to bloom into grownup love. Either way, he is, or may be, confessed in the line "I was a child and she was a child," in the manner in which they loved (which does not detract from its authenticity).

"Deep in earth" is also marvelous phrasing. One may be tempted to say, as I caught myself at first, "Deep in *the* earth my love is lying," which, in itself, is a darkly beautiful line, but as Poe hears it and has framed it, the added article takes something from it, makes it stumble in its present orchestration. Without it, the powerful trochee is maintained. With the iambic second line, it makes a charmingly melancholy little poem. To paraphrase—he builds a temple to his solitude then weeps that he's alone.

THE FEVER CALLED "LIVING"

In a letter to Annie Richmond, 18 November 1848, a married woman whom Kopley refers to as Poe's "true love" (416), Poe wrote of his attempt, or his meditated attempt at suicide, for he was not aware of the potency of the laudanum. He mentioned his agony upon their parting and reminded her of a promise she made, a "holy promise, which was the last I extracted from you in parting—the promise that under all circumstances, you would come to me on my bed of death . . . for I did not doubt for one moment, that my own Annie would keep her sacred promise" (*Letters* 2.402). He tells her of the two bottles of laudanum he had procured, and that after it "was rejected from the stomach, I became calm & to a casual observer, sane." Earlier in the same letter he refers to Mrs. Richmond as ". . . my darling, my Annie, my own sweet sister Annie, my pure beautiful angel – wife of my soul – to be mine hereafter & forever in the Heavens" (2.401). It was the identical language he had used with Virginia. "Woman" at this

point in Poe's life is more of a construct of survival and redemption shaped in imagination of the poet. A week after writing Annie Richmond, he wrote two letters to Sarah Helen Whitman, back-to-back, the second with the following words, "My sole hope, now, is in you, Helen. As you are true to me or fail me, so do I live or die" (2.410). Fever, indeed. The first version of "For Annie" [A] was sent in manuscript to Annie Richmond in March 1849. This history may or may not have influence on the poem or its interpretation, and yet on the surface it appears to do so. The first three stanzas provide context.

> Thank Heaven! the crisis –
> The danger is past,
> And the lingering illness
> Is over at last –
> And the fever called living
> Is conquered at last.
>
> Sadly, I know
> I am shorn of my strength,
> And no muscle I move
> As I lie at full length –
> But no matter! – I feel
> I am better at length.
>
> And I rest so composedly,
> Now, in my bed,
> That any beholder
> Might fancy me dead –
> Might start beholding me,
> Thinking me dead. (Mabbott 1.456)

Death bed? Casket? Playful hoax? By the narrator's grasp of observation, he argues a convincing case for his death, though the dead can hardly spin out a lyric or persuade so convincingly. This conceit is a form of seduction, an odd form, granted, and perhaps sincere, but in the pretense of death, according to the letter, she must attend him, she must be there or break a sacred promise. The first ten or so stanzas are a description of what it is like to be dead.

> And ah! let it never

Be foolishly said
That my room it is gloomy
And narrow my bed;
For man never slept
In a different bed –
And, to sleep, you must slumber
In just such a bed" (1.457)

My tantalized spirit
Here blandly reposes,
Forgetting, or never
Regretting its roses
Its old agitations
Of myrtles and roses:

For now, while so quietly
Lying, it fancies
A holier odor
About it, of pansies –
A rosemary odor,
Commingled with pansies–
With rue and the beautiful
Puritan pansies

And so it lies happily,
Bathing in many
A dream of the truth
And the beauty of Annie –
Drowned in a bath
Of the tresses of Annie.

She tenderly kissed me,
She fondly caressed,
And then I fell gently
To sleep on her breast —
Deeply to sleep
From the heaven of her breast. (1.458)

Thematically, death and love and a beautiful woman are once again present, though without the gravity that most often attends them. The voice is not that of the bereaved (for the crisis has passed), nor is melancholy the dominant tone. Annie herself becomes the death bed—soft, enflowered, perfumed, serene—that is, funereal. The pansy and rosemary, the roses, rue, and

myrtles, the panoply of flora enriching the atmosphere about the narrator's bed of strange proportion. It may be a game the narrator-poet is playing, based on a promise made by Annie Richmond. There is a powerful resolve, the cycle of saturation (crisis) and collapse having done its strange office, as the language of its opening suggests "The danger is past, / And the lingering illness / is over at last" (1.456). The entire lyric is a darkly clever account from the one lying in a coffin, the narrowness of the bed, lying at full length, the freedom from all sickness and suffering suggesting the tranquility of death. In "death," all the horrors of his life are resolved, and there is resolve, a calm resolution about this poem, and the confidence of the narrator never wanes. He is sure of the love of his Annie. The conceit, the seduction works, and does so in a lyric, the last few stanzas of which Kopley writes in which "Poe integrates into his work the loving and healing consolation that he must have felt from his beloved Annie" (431). The final stanza:

When the light was extinguished,
She covered me warm,
And she prayed to the angels
To keep me from harm —
To the queen of the angels
To shield me from harm.

And I lie so composedly,
Now, in my bed,
(Knowing her love)
That you fancy me dead —
And I rest so contentedly,
Now, in my bed,
(With her love at my breast)
That you fancy me dead —
That you shudder to look at me,
Thinking me dead: —

But my heart it is brighter
Than all of the many
Stars in the sky,
For it sparkles with Annie –
It glows with the light
Of the love of my Annie –

With the thought of the light
Of the eyes of my Annie. (Mabbott 1.458-59).

Thematically, it is all for the love of a woman. There is death in this poem but no gloom. It is actually a playful little farce set to a pleasant music. One might think it as Poe's way of making Annie smile after the trauma of his botched suicide. Being one of Poe's widower poems, this one is musical, not unlike others in this category (the latter poems), but without the melancholy. Being musical, the notion of saturation and collapse becomes pronounced, depending on performance.

Chapter 5 — "The Lost Parent": "Annabel Lee" as Imaginative Inheritrix

"It is stamped with the image of true genius — and genius in its happiest hour" (Whitty 199). This tribute to "The Raven" is from one of Poe's earlier biographers, J. H. Whitty, who added that "It is one of those things an author never does but once." Accurate and well expressed, this statement provides a curious and yet extraordinary way of describing one of the many paradoxes in the nature of genius. While Poe's most famous poem may have been the result of "genius in its happiest hour," it was certainly not Poe's happiest hour. Far from it. While there may be studies that attempt to measure the differential between the quality of an artist's work against the severity of his or her suffering (an elusive quest), what *can* be observed is that during that awful season, Poe's genius flourished, throwing off, as it appeared to do, its former restraints, allowing him to compose something exceptional, beyond his antecedent poems or their conventional modes, "exceptional" suggesting the advent of poems that are in many ways more recognizably or quintessentially Poe. This is not uncommon with a great artist. *Hamlet* was composed three years or so after the death of the poet's son, Hamnet, who died in 1597 at the age of eleven. John Shakespeare, the poet's father died the year it was completed, 1601. The play is about fathers and sons, about "the poison of deep grief' (*Ham.* 4.5.75), sorrows that come not in "single spies but in battalions" (4.5.78-79). And *Hamlet* is certainly "one of those things an author does only once." The rigor, the expenditure of white-hot heat it takes to shape a tragedy like *Hamlet* or a poem like "The Raven," and at so profound a cost, one should not be too surprised if it reflects a unique form of self-medication. The proverb then is true, that "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath" (*MV* 2.7.9). If a work like "The Raven," *Hamlet*, or "Ulalume," is "stamped with an image of genius," it is by way of hot press. Only a blind poet could have written *Paradise Lost* or *The Odyssey*. What if, therefore, in his last works, from

"The Raven" on, due to a promising new dispensation, or by the emancipation of his genius, Poe had more than one such poem or a work of prose that might be classified as "one of those things an author does only once?" What might be said about "Annabel Lee" or *Eureka*, remembering that Shakespeare wrote his great tragedies following *Hamlet*?

From "The Raven" forward, 1844-1849, Poe's latter poems were his most musical poems, a condition that signals a volta, that is, a turning, a shift in the career of both the poet and the refinements of his verse. His commitment to theme—singular—and its variations, had deepened, the motifs this study has identified and explored, from the incremental terrors of "The Raven" to the serene midnight of "Annabel Lee." With Virginia's death those motifs he had experimented with over a couple of decades, that he had "rehearsed" in one form or another, inventing, reinventing, writing, rewriting, from "Tamerlane" forward, reaching, as they were, toward the finale, came into sharp distinction with "The Raven." And while his more famous last poems are musical—"The Raven," "Ulalume," "The Bells," "Annabel Lee"—they are not musical each in the same way. Each has its own unique musical signature, the effects of which are all its own, singular. Though they differ in musicality, thematically these four poems claim a homogeneity or genetic likeness among them. Three of them feature the death of a beautiful woman, a lost paradise, the voice of a bereaved lover, the sacrality, the ideality, the melancholy, the impossibility, the envious angels, all of his fond tropes—the exception being "The Bells," which may be interpreted as four stages of life beginning with the youthful sparkle of silver bells, and a progression to wedding bells, then alarm bells, and, at last, the tolling of a knell, following, as the poem does, McGann's trajectory from illusion to fear. The narrative arc of "The Bells" shares similarities with "The Haunted Palace," in its transition from "a world of merriment" (Mabbott 1.435), the verdure and buoyant insouciance of youth, to something more

sinister, governed by a disturbed mind, “evil things” having “Assailed the monarch’s (thought) high estate” (1.316).

Musically, however, the only likeness these four poems share is a deftness of phonetic orchestration. The musicality of “The Raven” is a world apart from that of “Annabel Lee.” Where “Ulalume” swims or floats along at times, none of the others share its peculiar liquescence, not even “Annabel Lee.” Though hardly in the mind of its creator, due to its time signature, a steady semi-audible pulse, and a continuous cycle of saturation and collapse there are readings of “The Bells” where it is possible to hear the sound of a train moving along the tracks, the rails creating a continuous rhythm beneath, the kind of onomatopoeic movement you might hear in a Thomas Wolfe novel. Consider this bizarre and drunken little passage from *Of Time and the River* as Eugene Gant, in a train car and under a hypnotic of sound (and the taint of alcohol), gazes at the moon while the train gathers speed and rhythm beneath him. If the rhythm is punctuated, his stream of language is not. It simply rolls with the rhythm underneath him. Read the following with a beat.

> . . . many rivers lay dreaming in the moonlight beaming in the moonlight dreaming in the moonlight moonlight moonlight seeming in the moonlight moonlight moonlight to be gleaming to be streaming in the moonlight moonlight moonlight moonlight moonlight moonlight moonlight moonlight . . .” (70).

Depending on performance, a similar sound of rails might be heard in this sample passage from the 1849 “The Bells” [E/G].

> Keeping time, time, time,
> In a sort of Runic rhyme,
> To the tintinnabulation that so *mu-si-cal-ly* wells [syllabification indicates performance]
> From the bells, bells, bells, bells,
> Bells, bells, bells—
> From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells. (Mabbott 1.435)

Again, this is late Poe. He is all music now, under the care and influence of his deeper instincts. Of the four poems, among which we might add “Elderado” and “For Annie” for their own singularity, the subtlest of effects are found perhaps in “Ulalume” and “Annabel Lee,” both of which must be recited aloud or “sounded to the ‘inner ear’” to achieve the full effect of its power.

THE SOUNDING SEA

“Annabel Lee” provides one of the better examples of successful cooperation between sound and sense. Polish scholar, Andrzej Zgorzelski, stresses that poems should be perceived as “sound-and-sense structures . . . complicated networks of relations, networks of sound patterns, stress regularities, compositional divisions and syntactical linguistic units” (qtd. in Studniarz 109). Poe’s latter poems, particularly, are a study in a variety of these networks. Zgorzelski adds that sound phenomena “are the only way to express the poem’s message.” This aligns perfectly with Poe’s insistence on the performative necessity, the understanding that performance *is* interpretation. “Everything about poetic rhythm and its underlying music for Poe resolves into recitation,” McGann affirms, “how the poetry is to be performed by the ‘reading’ individual” (178). Indeed, the poem becomes a “challenge to meaning because it is a challenge to recitation” (180). One of the more interesting things Studniarz’s study asserts is that any disruption of the meter or consistency, as in “The Raven,” “Ulalume,” has the potential to enhance or augment meaning, to bring it forward.

> Within the poetic text, the disruption of the dominant prosodic patterns, or the shift from one metrical system to another, serve as sense-discriminating devices, and as a result, the level of rhythmic organization becomes an area of rich patterning with a high potential for “semantic saturation.” (109-110)

This “disruption,” this “sense-discriminating device,” approaches, if obliquely, Poe’s use of a particular precept in Francis Bacon’s essay “On Beauty,” quoted verbatim in “Ligeia.” “There is no excellent beauty, that hath not some strangeness in the proportion” (Mabbott 2.311-312). Studniarz observes that “any tension in its rhythmic organization, any clash of differing metrical profiles, can readily assume a semantic function” (109). The second line of each stanza in “The Raven” offers an example of this disruption. Consider the line in stanza 1,“Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore” (Mabbott 1.364). The alliterative “quaint and curious” disrupts the trochaic flow of the line. Musically, it demands the imposition of sixteenth notes to satisfy the rhythm.

One of the more powerful effects in “Annabel Lee,” is its most subtle, out of the direct line of detection. Depending on how the poem is performed, in spite of the unspeakable events that took Annabel Lee away from her narrator-lover, at the margins of sense one is able to hear the sound of waves crashing or running upon the shore then receding back again. This is due to the natural cycle of saturation and collapse. To hear it is a function of Mabbott’s “inner ear,” for it creates an unforgettable ambient effect. In the following example from stanza 1, each alternating line, starting with line 2, “In a kingdom by the sea” seems to recede naturally, faintly but noticeably as a refrain, affecting, as it progresses, an ebb and flow of sonic movement. If, in “Ulalume” one hears the sound “like the lapping of a river upon a shore,” in like manner, in the orchestration of “Annabel Lee,” one may begin to hear the low ambient hiss of the ocean in its coming in (saturation) and in its going back out (collapse). The formatting of the following stanza, including italics, is for demonstration/clarification purposes.

> It was many and many a year ago [saturation],
> *In a kingdom by the sea* [collapse]
> That a maiden there lived whom you may know
> *By the name of Annabel Lee*;

> And this maiden she lived with no other thought 5
> *Than to love and be loved by me*.

It rocks—the way nature rocks—wind, ocean, the impossibly slow pulse of a sonata by Beethoven or a well delivered sonnet by Shakespeare. “Annabel Lee” in both versions was labeled “A Ballad.” Along with its musical effects, it has the serenity, soft textures, and soporific qualities one finds in a lullaby. My Hoffman may be showing, but considering the dark subject matter of certain classic lullabies—“Rockabye baby in the treetop,” for instance, where baby comes crashing down with what is left of the broken boughs—lying down by the side of a corpse does not seem so bad. The point is that “Annabel Lee” is at last rocked to sleep to the soft white noise of a “sounding sea.”

Thematically, this first stanza remembers a maiden, now absent, and a paradise lost in her absence. It is not yet known if the maiden is dead, but by the tone, the past tense, it is likely. The setting recalls a time past, suggesting that the tale is long settled. The voice demands very little effort to perform or to hear, thanks to the serenity it speaks with, its first noticeable property—soft, quiet, undisturbed, slightly wounded but sweet with melancholy and “exquisite pathos,” recalling, as it does, a time, place, and condition that *once was* but is no more. The seaside ambience is continuous throughout the poem, achieving an effective use of sound that conveys meaning through movement, through the slow rocking motion in the lines, inducing, as well, a mild hypnosis, inviting and depicting a somnambulance or dream state under a sad moon. Mabbott notes that one reader “felt the rhythm dirgelike, recalling the tolling of a buoy in the ebb and flow of the sea. Others hear the breaking of waves on the shore” (1.469). Drawing attention to Poe’s use, or overuse, of repetition, Davidson observes that:

> Laws of effect, mood, tone, music, length of poems reached their culmination in such a piece of expansion and overwriting as these lines from “Annabel Lee,” wherein, by

> means of repetition, each stanza coiled back on and absorbed its predecessor before it could move on again. (98).

He is referring specifically to the lines from stanza 2, "With a love that the wingéd seraphs of heaven / Coveted her and me," and the semantically equivalent lines in stanza 4: "The angels not half so happy in heaven, / Went envying her and me." Wilbur observes a similar kind of backwash. "Poe carried his penchant for incantatory repetition to an extreme, employing not only recurrent words and lines but a continual doubling-back of the narrative" (*Laurel* 151). While both objections are legitimate and plausible, the repetition not only does not argue with the cycle of saturation and collapse, it assimilates the behavior of the ocean, lapping and overlapping as waves tend to do, one over the other. This repetition, therefore, informs the work. The waves on the shore will continue to repeat the same cycle ad infinitum. The "doubling back," a feature of every second line in the poem (refrain), is an action common to a rolling sea. Whether it is intentional or not will perhaps invite further inquiry, but this reflexivity amplifies or enhances the rolling effect of the lines, its marine behavior. The phrase "kingdom by the sea" is repeated five times throughout the poem, the name "Annabel Lee" seven times. The repetitive long "e" is one the easiest of vowel sounds to make, therefore every other line in the poem ends with an effortlessness of sound, a slow decay.

There are choices to make when considering the narration of "Annabel Lee." Unreliable as many of Poe's narrators often are ("Tell Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," "The Raven"), one choice is that the narrator of "Annabel Lee" is alive, as Hoffman suggests. Then there is the necessity to explain the narrator's midnight dalliance, to "lie down by the side" of his darling his darling his life and his bride, raising the question of necrophilia, which seems unlikely. It is not that kind of poem. Even so, if lying next to a corpse asks a bit much of a modern reader, according to Bradford and McGann, a culture well adapted to mourning ritual and memorializing

would not have considered the notion macabre. Death was too much with them, a fabric of life. Of the poem itself, McGann adds, "To most early readers, the thought that 'Annabel Lee' is 'macabre' would itself have seemed a deeply macabre thought" (186). The narrator could be dead, that is, he could be a ghost, which would make sharing a sepulcher more palatable, removing the tension that something really weird is going on. Either way, that knowledge is kept from the reader, creating narrative tension though of a more understated nature. Neither choice excuses the torment and excessive sorrow the narrator has experienced to tell his tale, or that his confrontation with vengeful angels did not render hellish results which resulted in the death of Annabel Lee in the first place, affecting his separation from her, due to the seraphic spoil of the paradise they had or might have had. Nor does the poem offer any certainty that its heroine is in the supernal or not. Again, the ambiguity contributes to the tension, and again, as if by indirection. Another choice is that this sweetly sad ballad takes place in the mind of a living narrator; that nightly, by way of imagination or dreaming, some invention of deep sorrow, he lies down by the side of his lost love—"For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams" (1.478), that the entire poem, as he has imagined it, is another exercise in "mournful and never-ending remembrance" (Thompson 684). To sleep is to sleep in remembrance, to have died figuratively *with* the beloved, that is, to share the tomb as from a dream.

INHERITRIX

As noted in Chapter 2, the dead beloved, the ideality, the sacrality, a paradise misprized, love cultivated from childhood, bereavement in the voice of narration, the impossibilities imposed by death, the enshrinement, the envious angels, the absence of the demonic—all these are present from the inception of Poe's career as a poet. While it is convenient to assume

"Annabel Lee" was inspired solely by his wife's death, the first [A] "Tamerlane" was published when Virginia Clemm was five years old, meaning that the motifs listed above were long a part of Poe's poetic reserves, Virginia's death adding new layers of gravity to those same motifs, as sanction from the grave. That is certainly not to underestimate the power her death wielded over Poe, how it altered him, or that her death did not provide inspiration for the poem. But the image was a well-rehearsed one, a sketch that grew under his hand one poem after another, "Annabel Lee," being the inheritrix, completing the image. Her death had the effect of profound arousal and clarification upon his genius—releasing it from out of its confines, so to speak, his latter work providing clearest testimony of its effects. This inheritance is framed by McGann as a consummation. "Poe's work concelebrates the impossible marriage of a tormented and a complacent mind, but the marriage is not consummated until he writes 'Annabel Lee'" (169). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "consummate" in the following terms: "to bring to completion; to finish, carry out, accomplish. To make perfect; to perfect. To attain perfection; to come to fruition or completion" ("Consummate," def. 2.a). Its noun form adds biblical context:

> . . . with reference to the end of the world, final judgment, etc.; a conclusion, end. Frequently in **consummation of all things, consummation of the world** [sic]. Sometimes with the suggestion of destruction. A conclusion, and, or death. A fitting, crowning, or inevitable outcome; a desired goal. ("Consummation," def. 3.a)

What McGann's observation suggests, in part, is that "Annabel Lee," is finished in a way that other poems in Poe's universe may not be. Whether or not Poe may have had a presentiment about his own death (it is likely that he did), it raises the question, did the creation of "Annabel Lee," and we can add *Eureka*, represent a change, a promising aesthetic shift in the expression of an otherwise tortured genius? Would his art, at last, have begun to deliver what critics suspected of Poe but he never quite delivered, indicating, as Margaret Fuller expressed it, "a power to do something far better?" "The point of Poe's great subject," McGann writes, "'mournful and

never-ending remembrance'—is to attempt the impossible: to do the dead justice on their own terms. 'Annabel Lee,' . . . is perhaps Poe's consummate effort to carry out that desire" (166).

If "Annabel Lee," in its way, represents the consummation of an entire career of verse, it is just as true that it owes a debt to the poems that preceded it, without which there would be no "Annabel Lee." It is indebted, for instance, to the death of Poe's figurative Helen—the beautiful, the ideal, the sacred enshrined—a death she dies again and again in "Tamerlane," in "To Helen," in "Lenore," in "The Raven," in "Eleanora" and "Ligeia," on and on, moving ever forward to the finale in "Annabel Lee," even as she did in real life—Eliza, Jane, Frances, Virginia. "Annabel Lee" owes a debt to the tensions that plagued Poe most savagely throughout the composition, enactment, and dénouement of his own tale, the cruelest being the protracted illness and ultimate death of his wife, without which his most popular titles, "The Raven" "Annabel Lee," and "Ulalume," would be very different poems, if written at all. At last, there is a debt to be paid to debt itself, to deep-voiced poverty and its effects. All of these together, including others unnamed and unknown, contributed to the constellation of meaning and influence of which "Annabel Lee" is sole inheritrix. There are many reasons for its importance, but more germane to this study is that it was the last treatment of his principal motif, "his final, perhaps even summary, treatment of 'the death of a beautiful woman'" (McGann 183). The significance of "Annabel Lee" to the poet himself may be beyond inquiry. According to Silverman, "Muddy reportedly said that when he read it to her, 'Oh! how he cried'" (401).

NEW FEATHERS FOR OLD TROPES

In the opening pages of *Eureka,* Poe introduces the proposition upon which his entire theory of the universe is founded: "*In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary*

Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their inevitable annihilation" (7). "Original Unity" represents the center from which all particles disperse and to which all the particles of the universe return. Like "Annabel Lee," the inheritrix of all the dead women and bereaved lovers and lost paradises before her, all polished and groomed for the finale, cannot the same be said of *Eureka*, that it too was the aggregate, the reservoir of Poe's scientific muse, that it too had genetic links that stretched as far back as his first serious gaze at the night sky, that not unlike "Annabel Lee" *Eureka* was old in him already by the time it was published? Does not *Eureka* also represent a "consummation," of a kind? Consider the proposition above. Even at first glance, if one is familiar with the tales of Edgar Poe, he or she could imagine a *Eureka* reading of "William Wilson." The narrator, William Wilson #1, is pursued by his morally superior and relentlessly annoying doppelganger-like copy, William Wilson #2, a whispery-voiced double who foils #1's flights of depravity from one location to another till at last William Wilson #1 takes matters into his own hands, cries out, "you *shall* not dog me unto death!" (Mabbott 2.447), fights with his scoundrel other, overwhelms him, thrusts the insolent double with his sword over and over, is distracted for an instant, then turns back to see not his dying adversary but a large mirror whose only reflection is himself, all bloody and undone, then dies alone. The narrative arc of the story might sound like this: *In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their inevitable annihilation.* The plotmaker Poe disperses his matter, the matter behaves as it is supposed to, accomplishing what it was meant to accomplish by his attention to unity of effect, then at the point of crisis, that is, of complete saturation, things return to Unity and with it the annihilation of all things. Cosmologically, this tale, like Poe's proposition, suggests the matter-antimatter squabble—by appearances, matter and antimatter are identical, yet when they collide, they cancel each other out.

"The Fall of the House of Usher," was published back-to-back with the tale of the William Wilsons in 1839, nearly twenty years before the publication of *Eureka*. "Usher" is the tale of another set of look-alikes, actual twins, a brother and sister whose house, hopes, and environs have long begun to "drop into the rotten mouth of death" (*Richard III* 4.4.2). Brother, overwrought, tragically overstimulated, losing his mind, thinking Sister is dead puts her in a vault in lowest recesses of the house, sits down and plays his guitar for himself and his guest because, like him, the guitar is an instrument on the verge of collapse. What is left of his mind corrupts even more, terrifies his narrator friend, panics when he suspects Sister is not dead. Sister then returns, bloody and in a fowl state of mind, trembles and falls on Brother and both die in the same moment. The narrative arc? *In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their inevitable annihilation.* With exceptions, of course, but the greater point is that there actually *is* a uni-verse in Poe, an immense singularity as peculiar to his genius as it is to the cosmos. Considering God as poet, the plotmaker, the stand-in for Poe, considering the continual synaptic firing of echopoetics, one motif colliding, ricocheting with and off another, creating whole new uni-verses, new singularities, new forms of the original, new feathers for old tropes, ever reaching toward saturation, the following might be said in a metaphorical sense, though not in piety:

> The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. (*New International Version*, Ps. 19:1-4)

Was *Eureka* intact in 1839? Did it have any substance? No, it was not and did not. Like, "Annabel Lee," it was inchoate, the seed of its manifestation was mere impulse, against which "William Wilson" was rehearsal, a sketch of a kind, as was "The Fall of the House of Usher," and other tales. The real bones of *Eureka* may have been far from him at the time, but both these

tales were imagined and written back-to-back, one released in October, the next in September of that same year. As if it were some operation of the unconscious, realized in time through experimentation (one tale, one poem, one essay at a time) and through some cooperation between intuition and ratiocination. Like the motifs Poe returned to again and again, the many Helens, the "Annabel Lees" he experimented with, that he sketched, that he renamed, reclothed, all the women he translated out of his blood and into his ink, providing new settings and new lines—this construct of twin souls that meet and cancel each other unto annihilation was another one of his common uncommon meditations turned motif. Due to the command this particular trope had in Poe, how it expanded by way of genius to cosmological proportions (as primordial particles will), questions worthy of inquiry may arise concerning his bid to love and be loved, for every time he met his "other," his twin soul, she was taken from him.

Eureka, therefore, while it is indeed Poe's vision of the universe, is also, as demonstrated, a vehicle by which Poe may expound his poetic theory. "Its thematic 'under current,'" McGann asserts, "is not a scientific theory; it is a poetic theory. *Eureka* elaborates a detailed model of poetic expression—suppositious, fanciful, and imaginative—out of a discourse field of contemporary prose fact and information" (106). Before going further, it is worth noting that one cannot begin to read *Eureka* without noticing the use not only the figurative but also biblical language, phrases like "In the beginning" (48) or "without form and void" (23) from Genesis, words that season the text, and with a sound for which antebellum America was well-tuned, a language Poe uses to his advantage. "The plots of God are perfect," he writes. "The Universe is a plot of God" (89). It "is one word" (*Marginalia* 41). This "one word" draws attention to the paronomastic flexibility of the term "universe" as noted above and in the introduction of this study, a word that literally means one verse or "uni-verse," the universal essence of singularity.

The language of *Eureka* also evokes the rhetorical weight, polish, and unimpeachable singularity of the *Logos*, the prologue to the Gospel of John, implied but not once mentioned in *Eureka*, a pulpit friendly incantatory passage with a beat (throb) of its own: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing has been made that was made" (*King James Version*, Jn. 1:1-3). The irony is that Poe's use of scriptural language was perhaps prop only, providing, as it did, the necessary nomenclature, language that held power and attraction to an antebellum American bible-literate culture. Poe was very much like Keats in his insistence that art provided "the only path to beatitude, dismissing religion as a vapid illusion. . . . He imagines, creates, enacts a religion without a church, a faith with no other Gospel than his own Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque, his Poems, his *Eureka*" (Hoffman 16). Besides, Poe's old boss, George Graham, said of the poet in 1842, "Literature with him was a religion, and he, its high priest" (*The Poe Log* 390), poetry being the closest analog to scripture.

The universe is thus a literature unto itself. Penetrating its mysteries is, therefore, in some sense, an exercise in literary criticism. As remarkable as that might sound, in the preface of *Eureka*, Poe requests that this work be judged as "an Art-Product alone:—let us say as a Romance; or, if I be not urging too lofty a claim, as a Poem" (5). He repeats this request at the close of his short preface, saying it is "as a Poem only that I wish this work to be judged after I am dead." Not uncommon in the prefaces of Poe's published verse, this emphasis on being judged as a poem is mildly apologetic in tone, if but in part and imperceptibly. The shift from the literal to the figurative softens its authority, providing a kind of ballast to the boldness of his claims, the erudition and involution by which he writes, and considering the audience for and to whom he writes. Calling it a poem adds a mystical component as well, which—and this is an

important distinction—implies a necessary kind of faith, tempering therefore any stringent obligation to fact, appealing rather to the unseen, to the metaphysical uncanny, obliging the reader to trust the messenger.

"Poe was opening up a way," Valéry writes, "teaching a very strict and deeply alluring doctrine, in which a kind of mathematics and a kind of mysticism became one." (207) Not so far removed from Keats's notion of *negative capability*, "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (*Selected Letters* 41-42), this is perhaps why Poe dedicates *Eureka* "to those who feel rather than to those who think," intuition being itself a kind of faith, poetry's version of it. Comparing Emerson to Poe, the idealist to the materialist, Heidi Silcox writes that both men "agreed on the supremacy of intuition, which guides one's thinking," that intuition "helps one understand certain realities that science cannot yet fully explain, including the existence of God and the nature of life after death" (Hayes 276). This appeal to intuition as the chief organ of perception is defined in *Eureka* as "the conviction arising from those inductions or deductions of which the processes are so shadowy as to escape our consciousness, elude our reason, or defy our capacity of expression" (22). In other words, this species of intuition is less ecstatic and more judiciously well-informed. "I offer this book of Truths," he continues, "not in its character of Truth-Teller, but for the Beauty that abounds in its Truth; constituting it true." We seek truth in beauty—a Keatsian proposition. "You would play upon me," says the poem proper, "you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to [the top of] my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ . . ." (*Ham.* 3.2.364-368). I invoke Shakespeare, again, as one might appeal to a received authority, a textus receptus, for Poe writes that "a poet, who is indeed a poet, could not, I think, fail of

making—a just critique" (Thompson 589). That is, the poet makes the better judge of poets and poetry, genius of genius.

Daniel Hoffman and others have observed that to understand Poe and his work, *Eureka* is indispensable. "Poe is rehearsing *Eureka* in many of his early works," Hoffman observes, "and that to understand Poe's entire oeuvre, one must read *Eureka*" (qtd. in McKenna-Uff 260). Elizabeth Vincelette says essentially the same thing. "Understanding the enormity of Poe's genius, recognizing and appreciating it, admitting it, requires reading *Eureka* as the beginning and the end of all his work, the alpha and omega of his poetic prophecy" (49). It becomes, in a sense, the Rosetta Stone of comprehension for a more thorough and certainly unconventional penetration of a text. With his usual sobriety, Paul Valéry adds, "All the consequences developed in Eureka, are not deduced with the precision, or explained with the degree of clarity, that one might desire. There are dark places and lacunae. There are interventions inadequately explained. There is a God" (164). Taking this faith a step further, Valéry, writes, "Poe's universe is formed on a plan the profound symmetry of which is present, to some degree, in the inner structure of our minds. Hence the poetic instinct should lead us blindly to the truth" (165).

FINALE: THE UNITY OF EFFECT

In his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* in *Graham's Magazine* May 1842, Poe introduced for the first time his concept of "unity of effect," the principle that a poem or a short story (something best read at a single sitting), should be crafted so to evoke a single emotional effect, or response, in the reader or listener. Every element of the piece should contribute to this one impression. The text should include nothing that does not serve this "vastly important artistic element, totality, or unity, of effect" (Thompson 677). Unity of effect becomes the center of

gravity to which, not unlike the mechanics of *Eureka*, all literary matter must be reconciled, sharing, as that matter does, the same genetic materials as the effect it is trying to achieve. In the opening of the "The Philosophy of Composition," putting together the pieces of what would become "The Raven," Poe debates what effect would make the greatest impact. "Of the innumerable effects," he asks, "or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?" (676)

Debating with himself and making decisions not by "a species of fine frenzy" or "ecstatic intuition," but claiming, as he does, that the work "proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem" (677). Whether a tale of ratiocination ("The Murders in the Rue Morgue" or "The Purloined Letter"), dissecting one of his own poems or theorems, or sitting down and composing pretty much anything, Poe *is* August Dupin, that is to say his sense of imagination and invention is of the noblest breed, matched only by his aesthetic vision and the severity of its polish. Though the phrase "mathematical exactitude" has been used earlier in this study to describe the character of this polish, there is no stiffness in its expression, and the musicality, for instance, of "The Raven" certainly deserves the compliment, especially considering that "During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control" (647). In another review of Nathaniel Hawthorne in *Godey's Lady's Book*, November 1847, in a piece called "Tale Writing," Poe writes:

> A skillful artist has constructed a tale. He has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having deliberately conceived a certain *single effect* to be wrought, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events, and discusses them in such tone as may best serve him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very first sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then in his very first step has he committed a blunder. . . . there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. (Thompson 692)

This notion of unity of effect is where *Eureka* intersects with Poe's imaginative works, that unites Poe's cosmology with his tales and poems, where they share the same mind, so to speak. A note of interest, when Poe was tinkering with a subtitle for *Eureka*, he had not thought about referring to is a prose poem until he got the idea from a review in the *New York Express,* that read: "The work [*Eureka*] has all the completeness and oneness of plot required in a poem" (Burton R. Pollin qtd. in Levine xv).

Other than specifics of nomenclature, Poe's entire philosophy of Unity is indistinguishable whether cosmos or poem—both are reflected in this principle. This supports the suggestion by Vincelette, Hoffman, and others that *Eureka* provides insight into Poe's imaginative literatures. By a kind of self-ordained apotheosis, Poe becomes the divinized poet. It is not difficult to discern that in the above passage, the "skillful artist" can be substituted for God. Tresch adds that "Poe was applying his theory of literary composition to God's creation. Both were focused on *unity of effect*" (308). God is that same "skillful artist," the poet and plotmaker, and the universe the true image of a perfect plot. "In this sense, of course, perfection of plot is really, or practically, unattainable," Poe concludes, "but only because it is a finite intelligence that constructs. The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is a plot of God" (Levine 89).

Using "Annabel Lee," the poem that, in its way, has hosted this inquiry, like her predecessor "The Raven," she too is beneficiary of Poe's unity of effect. To extend the construct, every piece of creative writing can benefit from this unity of effect—poem, tale, essay, novel, a research study, every thought rendered to the written word, all become shaped by and accountable to the desired effect—those primordial particles having been diffused, dispersed outward, stanza by stanza, line by line, word by word, accomplishing that which each was sent

out to do, return at last to the "lost parent," that sublimity of Oneness, and with the same certainty of Conrad's injunction of carrying its "justification in every line" (an idea he perhaps cribbed from Poe). The unity of effect itself is not a theme, motif, an ornament, but a fixed law of Poe's wordcraft, a kind of working of his mind. And though its effects are of a high mathematical proficiency, there is nothing stiff, prickly, hard-edged, or pedantic about it. Far from it. For the beauty, precision, and delicacy which it is capable of rendering will not be the work of a mere mathematician, nor could it be, nor a musician, psychologist, charlatan, philosopher or holy man, but that of a poet, whose very flaws are poetical.

THE SHROUDED FIGURE

This study has drawn attention to twenty or so poems that satisfy the criteria, that is, to establish an inventory of poems with specific motifs that Poe gravitated to again and again whose theme was fashioned as a triptych—a confluence of love, death, and beauty. Considering the fifty or so published poems (this number does not include the revisions, the many repeated titles that appeared throughout the career of his verse) that means that close to half of his entire canon of verse shares the same Helen, the same death, the same lost paradise, the same bereaved lover, the same shade of melancholy, and so on. And once the *who* and the *what* have been addressed, *why* is always the next question, perhaps the most difficult, most elusive of questions. Ultimately, and certainly with Edgar Poe, the *why* belongs to the poet. By the rules of his own poetic theory, he does not tell us everything, nor will he. "Indefinitiveness" is *his* word. Why he returned to those same motifs will remain the shrouded figure in the undercurrent of his poems, of his biographies, of his correspondence, his tales, his essays, and in our best guesses. In that collection of motifs is where the tension was, the greatest pull of the strings, and, therefore, where the best sound was.

And that may be the one conclusion we *can* make, that the poet returned again and again because he heard music playing. It may be as simple as that.

Epilogue — "And Music at the Close"

"The Poetic Principle" was one of the four last works of Edgar Poe, works that include *Eureka*, "Annabel Lee," and "The Lighthouse," a tale left unfinished at the time of his death. "The Poetic Principle" is one of Poe's better works on poetic theory. Though it shares elements of both of the previous works of poetic theory, it does not suffer the pedantries and questionable reputation "The Rationale of Verse" seems to have earned, even against its more formidable moments, nor is it suspected of hoax or any sleight of hand that "The Philosophy of Composition" is often accused of, an essay McGann thinks of as "a perverse joke at the expense of people who, from his point of view, do not really understand about poetry" (American Masters). "The Poetic Principle" discusses what poetry is and what it is not, what deserves the title of "poem" and what does not. The principle itself is known by the pleasure it affords, the pleasure known in the contemplation of the beautiful, the poem's warm center, the province itself. To support his ideas, "The Poetic Principle" features poems from poets Poe admires—Tennyson, Byron, Shelley, Thomas Moore, Thomas Hood, and others—poems he would recite from memory in his lectures. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's proem to "The Waif," was a poem he particularly admired, specifically the lyric, one quoted earlier, that captures an essence of poetic melancholy. "A feeling of sadness and longing, / That is not akin to pain, / And resembles sorrow only, / As mist resembles rain" (*Collected Tales* 896). There is a refreshing completeness about such a line, that is, a profound finish—weightless and exquisitely well groomed. Stanza 8 is of similar power and construction.

> Such songs have power to quiet
> The restless pulse of care,
> And come like the benediction
> That follows after prayer. (896)

Following this poem and its eleven stanzas Poe makes a few comments about the smooth character of its movement, the "graceful insouciance of its meter, so well in accordance with the character of the sentiments, and especially for the ease of the general manner" (896), observations that can easily be made of "Annabel Lee." He draws attention to the paradox, that is, the tremendous effort it takes to achieve the appearance of effortlessness in a text, adding that "a natural manner is difficult only to him who should never meddle with it." Poe then cites a portion of a poem by William Cullen Bryant—"June." The following are the last two stanzas:

> I know that I no more should see
> The season's glorious show,
> Nor would its brightness shine for me,
> Nor its wild music flow;
> But if, around my place of sleep,
> The friends I love should come to weep,
> They might not haste to go.
> Soft airs, and song, and light, and bloom
> Should keep them lingering by my tomb.
>
> These to their softened hearts should bear
> The thought of what has been,
> And speak of one who cannot share
> The gladness of the scene;
> Whose part, in all the pomp that fills
> The circuit of the summer hills,
> Is that his grave is green;
> And deeply would their hearts rejoice
> To hear again his living voice. (897)

Again, Poe responds with commentary:

> The rhythmic flow, here, is even voluptuous—nothing could be more melodious. The poem has always affected me in a remarkable manner. The intense melancholy which seems to well up, perforce, to the surface of all the poet's cheerful sayings about his grave, we find thrilling us to the soul —while there is the truest poetic elevation in the thrill. The impression left is one of pleasurable sadness. (897-98)

I include this commentary to note the language Poe uses to describe these poems. There is much to learn about the critic from his particular vision of a work—"the truest poetic elevation in the

thrill" being a marvelous way to express the impact of the poem or a line or a particularly well-placed, well-chosen word. Once again, what Poe says of Bryant's "June" can be said of "Annabel Lee" for its own brand of voluptuousness—sable, liquid, the slow "wine dark" roll of its measures. Following this passage, he adds, "this certain taint of sadness is inseparably connected with all the higher manifestations of true beauty."

Another poem in this essay, the first of the many he cites, is by Percy Bysshe Shelley, a poem that Poe calls "Serenade," though the actual name is "Indian Girl's Song," or, as some know it, "The Indian Serenade" (Shelley 466-67).

> I arise from dreams of thee
> In the first sweet sleep of night,
> When the winds are breathing low,
> And the stars are shining bright:
> I arise from dreams of thee,
> And a spirit in my feet
> Hath led me—who knows how?
> To thy chamber window, Sweet!
>
> The wandering airs they faint
> On the dark, the silent stream—
> The Champak odours fail
> Like sweet thoughts in a dream;
> The Nightingale's complaint,
> It dies upon her heart;—
> As I must on thine,
> Oh, belovèd as thou art!
>
> Oh, lift me from the grass!
> I die, I faint, I fail!
> Let thy love in kisses rain
> On my lips and eyelids pale.
> My cheek is cold and white, alas!
> My heart beats loud and fast;
> Oh, press it close to thine again,
> Where it will break at last!

In some poems the movement of the saturation/collapse cycle is more dominant, as in Shelley's poem, each second line receding (depending on performance). With this poem, Poe responds

with the same positive regard and language easily descriptive of "Annabel Lee." Of the lines he writes, "Their warm, yet delicate and ethereal imagination will be appreciated by all—but by none so thoroughly as by him who has himself arisen from sweet dreams of one beloved, to bathe in the aromatic air of a southern midsummer night" (*Collected Tales* 891).

It is not improbable, therefore, especially after the composition of the latter poems—"The Raven," "Ulalume," "For Annie," and "The Bells,"—that "Annabel Lee" in some form, or some aspect of it, as suggested throughout this study, is on his mind, that it haunts him, not with anything resembling fear but something more akin to metaphysical preoccupation. His thought life was populated with the ghosts of Helen—be it Annie, Elmira, Sarah, and Virginia, alive, dead, it hardly mattered, not to mention his career-long gravitation toward the theme explored in this study. "In Poe's promise of never-ending remembrance of her girlish beauty," Silverman writes, "and his pleasure in joining her in early death, Annabel Lee represents all the women he loved and lost" (402). At the end, if indeed Poe was experiencing some measure of resolve, some artistic quietude following the crisis of his wife's death, however temporary that quietude may have proven to be, he had at last turned to the mode of composition that resonated most with his deeper, more primal instincts and to expression truest to its nature, that is, music. His artistic end being symphonic, in the manner that *Eureka* is symphonic, or the serenity of "Annabel Lee."

Being a magazinist meant not only providing interesting and well-executed copy for a magazine, it also meant being a promoter, a salesperson, an evangelist, an advocate comparable perhaps to a publicist today. Like Whitman, Poe was known to write his own reviews, and with his usual fiendishly clever tack. A review that was to be placed in *Graham's Magazine* summer 1849 remained unfinished and therefore unpublished. It was written by Poe under the pseudonym Walter G. Bowen, a name Poe used to write a delightfully wicked [cheeky] satirical review on

himself, the title of which was “A Reviewer Reviewed.” The following excerpts from Mabbott [A] provides a delightful gaze into the incomparable and outrageous genius of whom Hoffman refers to fondly as “Hoaxiepoe.”

> I do not intend to say a single word that shall not be accompanied *by the proof* Mr Poe, to say nothing of my own case, has done little else than “ride rough shod” over what he is in the facetious habit of denominating the “poor devil authors” of the land, and I presume that neither you nor any body else will think it unreasonable that, sooner or later, he should have the bitter chalice of criticism returned to his own lip — provided always and of course that the thing is done fairly, honorably, and with no trick or subterfuge — in a word, provided that the criticism be just.
>
> To follow Mr Poe's own apparently frank mode of reviewing, I will begin by putting the merits of my author “in the fairest light.” I shall not pretend to deny then that he has written several pieces of very considerable merit, and that some of these pieces [page 1380:] have attracted, partly of their own accord and partly through the puffing of his friends, an unusual degree of notoriety. . . .
>
> Of his criticisms I have not so much to observe in the way of commendation. They show scholarship, and the peculiar analytic talent which is the ruling feature in everything he writes. They are also remarkable for that Quixotic kind of courage which induces people of Mr P's temperament to be perpetually tilting at something — although it too often happens that the something is a windmill; and there is one good point about them which it would be unjust to omit; and that is, they show no respect for persons. . . .
>
> With Mr Poe's general style no great fault can be justly found. He has the rare merit of distinctness and simplicity, and can be forcible enough upon occasion; but as he has a most unmannerly habit of picking flaws in the grammar of other people, I feel justified in showing him that he is far from being immaculate himself. (Mabbott 3.1379-83)

“. . . *the rare merit of distinctness and simplicity, and can be forcible enough upon occasion*.” This shameless exercise in self-endorsement and the engine that drives it helps one understand what Hoffman means by his title *Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe* which is about all one can truly say. This observation is seasoned with levity, certainly, but Like Falstaff or Bottom, you can only love a creature like that. There is not a whole lot else one can do with them.

With the fame of “The Raven,” Poe wrote an essay called “The Philosophy of Composition,” essentially an explanation of how he composed his signature poem. While it provided interesting copy, it functioned also as a promotional piece, a branding agent, with the

understanding that if someone admires the poem, they may be curious how it was written, including the conditions by which it was written, in this case, the illness and death of his wife, Virginia, and its effects on his art. It is not improbable, therefore, that "The Poetic Principle" may have likewise been considered as a comparable kind of promotional support piece for "Annabel Lee," that the one could sell or create interest in the other and vice versa. The poems cited in "The Poetic Principle" are musical in a similar way "Annabel Lee" is musical, including tone and texture, which would allow Poe to "tune" his audience toward a particular sound and type of poem, not to mention that not only the poem and the essay were written around the same time (both published posthumously), but unlike "The Philosophy of Composition," the poem Poe is promoting is not in the essay. Of course, all this could simply be evidence to the movement and possession of his intellectual life, that writing a great poem summons up new or revised issues of poetic speculation. Still, collusion between the essay and the poem is not improbable, and however prescient Poe may have been, having, as Mabbott suggested, some intimation that "Annabel Lee" could very well be his last poem, the knowledge of his death was beyond him. Therefore, what became his last poem, musical as it was, and by content suitable for finale, and showing, as it did, a promise beyond the range of his earlier poems, "Annabel Lee" may just have represented the beginning of a new era of Poe's verse. This is, of course, conjecture suitable for epilogue. Poe *is* genius. And genius is, and will remain, elusive, vortical, at some remove from us. And yet, by some trick of the metaphysical uncanny it is often just as close or closer than our next cogent thought, running ahead as it most often does. It knows us too well.

AND MUSIC AT THE CLOSE

In Act 2 of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, an old and near-death John of Gaunt is awaiting the arrival of the king. In preparation, hoping to successfully communicate to the young monarch, in a brief but beautiful monologue he describes how rare and sage that words of the dying can and should be received:

> O but they say the tongues of dying men
> Enforce attention like deep harmony.
> When words are scarce, they are seldom spent in vain,
> For they breathe truth that breathe their words in pain
> He that no more must say is listen'd more
> Than they whom youth and ease have taught to glose;
> More are men's ends mark'd than their lives before:
> The setting sun, and music at the close,
> As the last taste of sweets, is sweetest last,
> Writ in remembrance more than things long past. (*R2* 2.1.1-10)

Deep harmony is a form of deep resonance, a kind of listening. It is that remote ping of recognition when a poem, or a line in a poem truly lands and makes a connection, at times unexpected even to the poet, something profoundly irresistible, and most often unnamable. I am not sure there is a better epitaph for Poe's last words than these lines from Shakespeare. His last poem, his last prose poem, and his last essay were all written in that same rare eye-of-the-storm serenity one detects in "Annabel Lee." This exquisite form of listening is what allowed the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" a more thorough penetration into his friend's state of mind, as troubling as it was. It is the effect Poe was after poem after poem, most particularly when death, beauty, and love were at the center of the argument. Any obstruction or failure to achieve this unwritten effect meant trying again, and again, as he appears to have done from "Tamerlane" to "Annabel Lee."

Disguised as prose in the last pages of "The Poetic Principle" are some of the most beautiful lines of verse in all of Poe, if not in all of English literature, and yet they are void of the usual architectural conventions of verse. There is not a broken line among them, only a series of

sentence fragments separated by en dashes and set in one long paragraph. Poe ends this litany with what may be considered the crowning of his most fundamental theme—the beauty and love of a woman. The entire lengthy paragraph is, according to Poe, and by the strangest of ironies, a "conception of what the true Poetry is, by mere reference to a few of the simple elements which induce in the Poet himself the true poetical effect" (704). True, indeed. And here, with "the setting sun, and music at the close," Poe proves himself Valéry's true poet, these "simple elements" reading as pure poetry, lines unlike any he has written, except by some dissemblance in his prose—the high music of substance, the last taste of sweets, sweetest last.

> He recognizes the ambrosia which he nourishes his soul
> in the bright orbs that shine in Heaven
> in the volutes of the flower
> in the clustering of low shrubberies
> in the waving of the grain-fields
> in the slanting of tall, Eastern trees
> in the blue distance of mountains
> in the grouping of clouds
> in the twinkling of half-hidden brooks
> in the gleaming of silver rivers
> in the repose of sequestered lakes
> in the star-mirroring depths of lonely wells.
> He perceives it in the songs of birds
> in the harp of Æolus
> in the sighing of the night-wind
> in the repining voice of the forest
> in the surf that complains to the shore
> in the fresh breath of the woods
> in the scent of the violet
> in the voluptuous perfume of the hyacinth
> in the suggestive odor that comes to him,
> at eventide, from far-distant, undiscovered islands,
> over dim oceans, illimitable and unexplored.
> He owns it in all noble thoughts
> in all unworldly motives
> in all holy impulses
> in all chivalrous, generous, and self-sacrificing deeds.
> He feels it in the beauty of woman
> in the grace of her step
> in the lustre of her eye
> in the melody of her voice
> in her soft laughter
> in her sigh

in the harmony of the rustling of her robes.
He deeply feels it in her winning endearments
in her burning enthusiasms
in her gentle charities
in her meek and devotional endurances
but above all
ah, far above all
he kneels to it
he worships it in the faith, in the purity,
in the strength, in the altogether divine majesty
of her love.

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