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**A Narrative and Thematic Analysis of Selected Stories of Edgar Allan Poe**

**Narativní a tematická analýza vybraných povídek Edgara Allana Poea**

**BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE**

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

Tímto bych chtěla srdečně poděkovat panu profesoru Martinu Procházkovi, s jehož pomocí jsem překonala mnohá úskalí. Bez jeho ochoty a vstřícného vedení by se práce neobešla.

## **Anotace:**

Tato práce se zabývá podrobnou analýzou vybraných povídek Edgara Allana Poea na základě jeho práce s vypravěčem, opakujícími se elementů, kterých Poe využívá, a jeho dramatického stylu. Téměř ve všech svých povídkách Poe vytváří atmosféru hororu závisící na rozpadající se identitě jeho subjektů, jenž ve své konfrontaci s nadpřirozenem objevují temné stránky vlastní duše. Neméně důležitá je jeho spojitost s podvratnou mocí humoru, kterého využívá buďto skrze grotesku nebo v prvoplánově satirických parodiích soudobých bizarních povídek. V úvodu práce se zabýváme osvětlením nejdůležitějších zásad povídkové tvorby tak, jak je formuloval sám Poe. Další kapitoly jsou rozděleny jak podle vypravěčů tak podle stylistických prvků a poskytují detailní náhled do klíčových aspektů Poeovy povídkové tvorby.

## **Abstract:**

This thesis is concerned with a detailed analysis of selected tales of Edgar Allan Poe on the basis of his employment of the narrator, the repeated elements Poe uses, and his dramatic style. In nearly all his stories, Poe creates an atmosphere of horror dependent on the crumbling identity of his subjects, who discover the dark side of their personalities in a confrontation with the supernatural. No less important is his connection to the subversive powers of humor, which he uses either in the character of a grotesque or in his satirical parodies of the contemporary bizarreries. In the introduction, we are concerned with an elucidation of the key concepts of Poe's story-writing theories. The following chapters are divided according to the narrators and stylistic aspects alike, and provide a detailed survey of the seminal characteristics of Poe's story telling.

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# 1.Introduction

The goal of this work is a detailed narrative and thematic analysis of three different groups of Poe's short stories in relation to his principles of story-writing and selected modern narrative theories. While much of the theoretical background is provided by Poe's own articles, Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and Franz Stanzel's *A Theory of Narrative*<sup>1</sup> serve us as useful sources for a more detailed study of Poe's narrators, who are central to the interpretation of the texts. We shall try to establish the effect these tales have on the reader, and discuss the interconnectedness of Poe's narrators and writing style with elements such as the grotesque, the uncanny, or parody.

In the first chapter, Poe's theoretical principles are discussed in relation to his critical essays and letters to his publishers, and shall provide us with a valuable insight into the creation of to the actual tales. The preface of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* and the article on Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* are used to delineate terms central to Poe's short stories and their respective characteristics.

The second chapter discusses Poe's use of the unreliable narrator in two of his horror stories, "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat", and its usefulness for Poe's specific brand of horror. The unreliability of such a narrator rests mainly in the mystification of the reader, created by the employment of dual personality, where the narrative perspective shifts between a narrating and an experiencing I, creating a distance between the "rational" evaluation of the present narrator, and the compulsion-driven account of his past deeds. This distance is, however, continuously being breached, resulting in a situation where the narrator himself (not to mention the reader) cannot be sure about what really happened. In addition, the formational role of symbolism as well as the psychology of the tales is touched upon, including a more detailed analysis of the specificity of Poe's style.

In the third chapter, stories such as "Metzengerstein", "Hop-Frog", or "The Mask of the Red Death" are evaluated in connection to diametrically different narrators, this time existing outside of the world of characters. These narrators at the same time differ from one another, significantly influencing our interpretation of the tales. Their existence outside the narrative makes them free to express their judgment on the narrated events, be it irony or moral indictment, and they enable us to gain a deeper insight into Poe's creation of horror.

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Karl Stanzel, *Teorie Vyprávění* (Praha: Odeon, 1988).

The distance (or lack of it) of the narrators is discussed in detail, and the effect it produces on the reader is speculated upon, as well as many of the thematic elements that contribute to Poe's intention, such as the grotesque or the uncanny. Each story is also viewed in detail from the stylistic perspective.

In the fourth chapter, we shall focus on Poe's subversion of horror in his parodies of the genre, "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and "A Predicament". This shall provide us with a deeper insight into what Poe stands against in the domain of horror and style. Poe's satire and grotesque characterization of a first-hand thrilling account is assessed and compared with the technique he uses in his seriously intentioned horror tales such as those discussed in the second chapter. The problematic of Poe using practically the same elements in his genuine horror stories and the texts that parody them is discussed at this point, which establishes the intrinsic connection of gruesome and grotesque elements in Poe's writings and questions Poe's attitude to his own literary output and the magazine culture of the day.

In the last chapter, the centrality of narrative strategies and the peculiarities of Poe's style are assessed, and readers' response to the stories cursorily questioned. The ambiguity of Poe's tone and intention is speculated upon in more detail, as well as the possible subversive effects of his narrative in his undeniable play with the reader. Poe's focus on the reader and the market-centered value of his tales is something that problematizes his reputation with the contemporary reader, and as such is also discussed in conclusion of the thesis.

## 2. Poe's Requisites for a Tale

One of the reasons why Edgar Allan Poe still so largely remains in the public consciousness today and continues to provoke further scholarly discussions is the number of interpretations his works have elicited and, above all, their author's uncertain relationship to them. Naturally, the infamous myths surrounding Poe and his debatable reputation have helped matters. It is ironic indeed that the man who most blackened Poe's name,<sup>2</sup> Rufus Griswold, should also be the one who insured his persistent recognition. If truth be told, there is no reason why Poe should be considered the father of the American short story since Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving and other prominent literati of the emergent nation have concerned themselves with tale writing before him. Nor can he be said to be the first one to propagate inherently American themes as his tales were mostly written in confirmation with the Gothic vogue of the day (which originated in Europe), and the first country in which they brought their author recognition was the Paris of Baudelaire and the French symbolists. Various critics have styled Poe as verbose and irreconcilable with the finer fiction on account of his lack of artistic skill and a conscientious abandon of higher standards in favor of literary demand. Why then should his name, in his time recognized first and foremost as that of the author of the famous "Raven" and a fiery critic, be familiar to almost anyone today and persist in provoking literary debates? The answer to that question lies in Poe's versatility, and in his being a forerunner of a truly modern fiction. Irrespective of the puzzles of his life, Poe had a very clear idea of how to construct a short story, and one of the keys to understanding his success is to realize how conscientiously he works with the concept of the storyteller, to discuss in detail the peculiarities of his style, and to connect both to other intrinsic elements he uses, such as grotesquerie, the uncanny and horror.

Before we start analyzing the individual tales, however, a few words need to be said à propos Poe's literary standards, since he himself was so meticulous to set them up. They will tell us much about Poe's style before the actual discussion of his tales and provide us with an insight into the most prevalent of his themes and some of their ambiguities. Indeed, it is often his theoretic principles that Poe is given most credit for. "The Philosophy of Composition" has long been recognized as one of the most important guides to poetry writing and Poe's precepts for the creation of short stories are today considered as basic requisites of good short

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<sup>2</sup> J. R. Hammond, *An Edgar Allan Poe Companion: a Guide to the Short Stories, Romances and Essays* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981) 25.

fiction. According to him, “the tale proper” gives the writer “unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent, which can be afforded by the wide domains of mere prose.”<sup>3</sup> Poe was well aware that the “whole tendency of the age [was] Magazine-ward,”<sup>4</sup> and it was in this domain he decided to establish himself. While it is unquestionable Poe saw himself first and foremost as a poet, he was forced by the demands of the market to be occupied with other pursuits. His demand for brevity in fiction was a logical demand in a magazine milieu; indeed, all the tales analyzed here do not take up the space of more than a few pages.

In Poe, the greatest importance is allocated to the effect a tale produces, and as his particular trait is inducing horror, wonder or laughter, there is indeed no need for a lengthy narrative. According to him,

In almost all classes of composition, the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance. It is clear, moreover, that this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting. (...) All high excitements are necessarily transient.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, these are the precise qualities whose lack Poe bewailed in his criticism of Nathaniel Hawthorne (together with his propensity for allegory, lack of originality,<sup>6</sup> and a general tendency to write only for himself and a close circle of his friends).<sup>7</sup> It is significant that Poe’s only attempt at a novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, turned out to be a commercial failure, Poe himself calling it “a very silly book,”<sup>8</sup> precisely because the author broke the rules he himself was trying to set up. In his tales, however, he never violated his own precepts. Indeed, while some of the writings discussed here cannot be

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<sup>3</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Review of Hawthorne -Twice-Told Tales”, from *Graham's Magazine*, May 1842, pp. 298-300, The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, Inc., 13 April 1998, 13 November 2011  
<<http://www.eapoe.org/works/criticism/gm542hn1.htm>>.

<sup>4</sup> Rayburn S. Moore, “The Magazine and the Short Story in the Ante-Bellum Period”, *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (May, 1973), pp. 44-51, jstor, 13 November 2011  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/3197762.pdf?acceptTC=true>> 44.

<sup>5</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Review of Hawthorne -Twice-Told Tales”, from *Graham's Magazine*, May 1842, pp. 298-300, The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, Inc., 13 April 1998, 13 November 2011  
<<http://www.eapoe.org/works/criticism/gm542hn1.htm>>.

<sup>6</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Tale-Writing — Nathaniel Hawthorne” (B), *Godey's Lady's Book*, November 1847, pp. 252-256, The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, Inc., 11 March 2000, 13 November 2011  
<<http://www.eapoe.org/works/criticism/glb47hn1.htm>>.

<sup>7</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Tale-Writing — Nathaniel Hawthorne” (B), *Godey's Lady's Book*, November 1847, pp. 252-256, The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, Inc., 11 March 2000, 13 November 2011  
<<http://www.eapoe.org/works/criticism/glb47hn1.htm>>.

<sup>8</sup> David Sinclair, *Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Dent & sons, 1977) 169.

conclusively classed in any one category, Poe elaborates one effect only throughout their development, and it is this effect that usually provides the necessary “punch line” revelation at the end. Ironically, this totality of impression is what he is most frequently criticized for. While a demand for straightforwardness was needed in an age when verbosity such as Poe parodies in “A Predicament” permeated literature, the studied effect of Poe’s tales now tends to produce an impression of predictability. This is indeed one of the things, together with Poe’s lengthy writing style and manipulative commentary, that Wayne C. Booth criticizes in Poe.<sup>9</sup> Unity of effect and shortness of narrative necessarily imply the need of a tight plot. In Poe’s own words, “in the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design.”<sup>10</sup> When it does not keep with such a design, the author would do better to start afresh because lengthy accounts invariably lead to repetition, annoyance and boredom. Poe was, of course, aware that in a tale, detailed characterization or loose ends simply couldn’t exist. While such digression can be tolerated in a novel where space permits it, it would be disastrous in shorter fiction. The only instance of digression we shall encounter here can be found in “A Predicament” and “How to Write a Blackwood Article”, and that only because the stories’ explicit purpose is to parody such excesses.

One of the most interesting themes in a study of Poe’s fiction is his apparent oscillation between mysticism and rationalization. His professed distaste for Hawthorne’s allegory naturally leads him to demand “intellect” and “science” in a tale<sup>11</sup> (that we most commonly encounter in Poe’s “tales of rationalization”<sup>12</sup> (detective stories)). In fact, many of his tales deal with narrators with a pronounced desire to live in a well ordered and comprehensible world, who are unable to deal with anything unnatural come knocking at their door. Their efforts to rationalize the rapidly alienating world are thwarted by their own inability to assess what is real and what is unreal outside of their own heads. The question is not over what is or is not real, but over what appears or could just be real. Poe is unsurprisingly led, among other things, to his famous unreliable narrators by this prescription.

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<sup>9</sup> While Booth admits that the effect could have been different on Poe’s original readers, he is skeptical of its usefulness with the modern audience, requiring a more subtle approach. What he disregards is Poe’s enduring popularity and the pleasure his readers know to take in his exuberance of characterization and a carefully graduated effect of tension. [Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Second Edition (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 201-205.]

<sup>10</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Review of Hawthorne -Twice-Told Tales”, from *Graham's Magazine*, May 1842, pp. 298-300, The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, Inc., 13 April 1998, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/criticism/gm542hn1.htm>>.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Development of the American Short Story: an Historical Survey* (New York; London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1923) 137.

<sup>12</sup> Hammond 91.

He was very well aware that too much lucidity destroys mystery, and unreliability was the logical solution that he frequently employed in his “bizarceries”.<sup>13</sup> However, this penchant does in no way precipitate him into producing blurry plots where all we can be certain of is that no explanation is possible. Even though his tales are obviously fictional, Poe blends the real and the unreal to such a degree that the reader is tempted to credit the deception.

Poe elaborated upon a desirable story-telling style even further. In his letter to Thomas W. White, which, among other things, shows us that Poe spent some thought on just what was wanted in the magazine culture of the day, Poe states that the vogue is centered on “the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful colored into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical.”<sup>14</sup> In the tales discussed here, we shall encounter all of these, and we shall see that it is not just one separate technique that he tends to employ at a time. Indeed, he seems to have been especially fond of blending grotesquery and horror, and the display of wit inevitably leads him to an exaggeration of style and narrative in every possible way. Martin Procházka and Zdeněk Hrbata affirm in their *Romantismus a romantismy* that “the esthetics of the Romantic art anticipates Modernism in the fact that the effect of the narrative is based on intensity”,<sup>15</sup> which is in fact what Poe himself strives for in most of his tales. Poe’s age did not demand the sedate and moralizing tales of the past. His time was a time of change and turbulence and being so, it required a literature no less dramatic.

Lastly, many critics have been puzzled by what exactly Poe means by the predicates of “grotesque” and “arabesque” allotted to a volume of his tales including among others “How to Write a Blackwood Article”, “A Predicament” or “Metzengerstein”. In his preface to *The Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, Poe claims that the denominations alone should be sufficient to determine the category of each separate tale; the need of a subsequent explanation and the confusion of the readers upon the subject seem to prove him wrong. In Poe’s own words, “I speak of these things here, because I am led to think it is this prevalence of the “Arabesque” in my serious tales, which has induced one or two critics to tax me, in all friendliness, with what they have been pleased to term “Germanism” and gloom.”<sup>16</sup> That the arabesque should necessarily imply Germanism and gloom is nonsensical. Rather, we should

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<sup>13</sup> Pattee 121.

<sup>14</sup> Napier Wilt, “Poe’s Attitude toward His Tales: A New Document”, *Modern Philology*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Aug., 1927), pp. 101-105, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/433406.pdf?acceptTC=true>> 102.

<sup>15</sup> Zdeněk Hrbata, Martin Procházka, *Romantismus a romantismy: pojmy, proudy, kontexty* (Praha: Karolinum, 2005) 11. \*my translation

<sup>16</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, from Eric W. Carlson, *Introduction to Poe: a Thematic Reader* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, [Cop. 1948]) 483.

understand it as L. Moffitt Cecil does; something “strangely mixed, fantastic.”<sup>17</sup> In *Romantismus a Romantismy*, Procházka explains the principle of Poe’s arabesque as an imaginative play with the reader, connected to the esthetics of ornamentation and other characteristics leading to abstraction, ultimately supplementing both horror and the grotesque.<sup>18</sup> As for the grotesque itself, we should see it as a blend of two opposing elements, invoking both horror and laughter<sup>19</sup> (something we shall encounter here in tales such as “A Predicament” or, most prominently, in the character of Hop-Frog). “A Predicament” and “How to Write a Blackwood Article” are stories included in *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, and they certainly incorporate both horror and laughter to the best advantage, but they would better be classed as satires since that was undoubtedly Poe’s intention in writing them. In these, spontaneous laughter is substituted by intellectual wit. Indeed, we can even speculate whether Poe’s satire of the thoughtlessness of the contemporary culture, exemplified by the derided Blackwood, does not turn against the reader even more forcibly than against the characters themselves. On the other hand, we are certainly invited to laugh with Poe, and whether we do so with sour grace or not is our own choice.

What we always have to keep in mind is Poe’s versatility, although it is possibly the cause of so many readers having such different views on Poe’s fiction. Apart from being uncertain of his literary merits, we can never be sure whether the sensation his tale produces is the one it was supposed to elicit. Cecil suggests that Poe “remains silent on the question of whether there might be a prevalence of the “Arabesque” also in his humorous and satiric stories. And he places no limitations upon the extent to which the “Grotesque” might appear throughout his fiction.”<sup>20</sup> There is nothing that especially distinguishes “The Black Cat” or the “Tell-Tale Heart” from certain stories entitled as arabesque, such as “The Fall of the House of Usher” or “William Wilson”. There is a tendency to horror in a huge number of Poe’s stories, and most of them can also be viewed as self-conscious parodies on the contemporary Gothic vogue or can be said to contain a large dose of the grotesque or even the purely comical. In analyzing Poe’s tales, we shall see that distinctions overlap and while a certain tendency prevails, it cannot be said that there is only one element to any of them. “Metzengerstein” might be entitled “Arabesque”, but this one story in particular stands at the core of the

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<sup>17</sup> L. Moffitt Cecil, “Poe’s “Arabesque””, *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter, 1966), pp. 55-70, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/1769598.pdf>> 56.

<sup>18</sup> Procházka, *Hrbata* 153.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Gloucester, Mass.: Indiana University Press, 1986) 187.

<sup>20</sup> L. Moffitt Cecil, “Poe’s “Arabesque””, *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter, 1966), pp. 55-70, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/1769598.pdf>> 55.

characterization problem even by Poe's own admission. As one of his earlier tales, it incorporates most of the elements of the eighteenth century Gothic, such as ruined castles, aristocratic tyrants, oppressed vassals or moving tapestries.

While reviewing Poe's tales, a critic wrote to Poe that "some of your bizarreries have been mistaken for satire- and admired, too, in that character. They deserved it, but you did not, for you did not intend them so."

"Most of them were intended for half banter, half satire- though I might not have acknowledged this to be their aim even to myself," Poe replied.<sup>21</sup> If an unacknowledged humor takes place in "Metzengerstein", and even Poe is not entirely sure, who is the reader to judge? It is just possible Poe wrote "Metzengerstein" as a tale of horror in all earnestness, and when afterward reproached for its closeness to the fashionable Blackwood magazine articles, he decided to ascribe to it an alternative interpretation. This would indeed be supported by some other tales, such as "A Predicament", where the satirical intention is beyond all doubt.

The critical requirements we have discussed here are the basis of Poe's narrative technique, and in the tales analyzed further, we shall draw upon their significance in detail. As Poe's narrators serve as mediators of his stories and are therefore indispensable in a more complex evaluation of Poe's output, they shall be considered along with Poe's style. We shall begin with Poe's well-known tales "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" and in the process, we shall discuss such key concepts to Poe's output as narrative unreliability, psychological horror of a crumbling personality, the uncanny, and the underlying principle of mystification.

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<sup>21</sup> Pattee 121.

### 3. “Horror Not of Germany but of the Soul”: Poe’s Unreliable Narrators

In the preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, Edgar Allan Poe makes the famous assertion that his specific “brand” of terror, which is the main ingredient of many of his short stories, is “not of Germany, but of the soul”.<sup>22</sup> What he means by this is that while in some of them he might be using similar elements as the classical eighteenth century Gothic, external threat is not to be the principal source of horror itself. He therefore belongs to the writers of the Romantic period who internalized evil,<sup>23</sup> suggesting the subversion of human identity. What Poe seems to be especially interested in while speaking of the “horror of the soul” is what he calls the spirit of perverseness. This irresistible urge to do wrong forces its victims to horrific crimes committed over trivialities, crimes that in their disordered minds assume gigantic proportions.

“And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS,”<sup>24</sup> the narrator of “The Black Cat” tells us. It is this inclination, even more than alcohol, which makes him throw away his humanity and contributes to the gradual disintegration of his personality. The narrator, “noted for the docility and humanity of [his] disposition”<sup>25</sup> from an early age irredeemably divests himself of all restraint as soon as he finds out that violence in the domestic circle does not bring on punishment. His behavior is a direct threat to the domestic circle<sup>26</sup> and intensifies the alienation of the narrator from a safe family background. The point Poe makes in the tale is that good and evil are not black and white, but struggle for ascendancy in every human mind. The first “black cat” might have been unoffending enough, but when we meet the second one, we might indeed be tempted to credit the narrator’s fearful impressions. Haunted perpetually by the animal’s persecution, by the end of which the cat lodges on his chest even during the night, offering no chance of respite, the narrator has no other choice but to dispose of it as quickly as possible. As a signature mark of Poe’s melodrama, the narrator picks up an axe (of all things) to do this, and manages to kill his wife instead. Fred Botting suggests in his survey of Gothic literature that

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<sup>22</sup> Carlson 484.

<sup>23</sup> Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996) 91.

<sup>24</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 271).

<sup>25</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 269).

<sup>26</sup> Botting 5.

this branch of letters is primarily “a writing of excess.”<sup>27</sup> The killing of a beloved female would indeed have represented one of the utmost sources of horror in the Romantic mind and it certainly does so in Poe’s. What the second cat embodies, naturally, is not just the vengeful spirit of the first animal, brutally killed by the narrator in one of his bouts of violence, but also the memory of this deed and the guilt it engenders.

Presenting us with a threat coming from an animal that would normally not evoke any misgivings in our hearts is an interesting point. It falls into a category defined by Sigmund Freud as “The Uncanny”. Freud argues that the uneasy feeling the uncanny produces in us is caused by the fact that something “homely” (from the German *Heimlich*) has become “un-homely.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, something known to us intimately and encountered perhaps every day has unexplainably acquired qualities of horror. The narrator of “The Black Cat” describes his narrative as “the most wild, yet most homely”,<sup>29</sup> and characterizes the happenings as “a series of mere household events”.<sup>30</sup> He takes the second cat home precisely because it is “fully as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one,”<sup>31</sup> and therefore evokes a feeling of familiarity. The one difference from the first cat should have acted as a warning to him, but the pleasant sensation of encountering that which has previously been intimately close to him compels him to appropriate the animal. Very soon, however, the cat starts to act as no ordinary creature should have done, and this unnaturalness in its behavior is the source of its uncanniness and results in its being first maltreated and finally shunned.

It needs to be said that an astonishing number of Poe’s characters can be classed as uncanny, usually providing a half-supernatural, half-animal source of terror. Even the old man in “The Tell-Tale Heart” has an unnatural vulture eye, which turns an inconspicuous, familiar human being into a source of horror. The hero of “Metzengerstein” is threatened by a half-human gigantic horse, and Hop-Frog (who is perhaps more fit to be classed as a grotesque) is persistently being likened to a monkey. The boundaries between the familiar and the unreal are effaced and nothing is quite what it seems. The key point about this is, of course, that the uncanny plays upon our uncertainty. What if the vulture eye in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is just a figment of imagination? What if the cat is just an ordinary cat and much of what the narrator experiences takes place only in his alcohol-befuddled brain? The narrator himself says that “hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the

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<sup>27</sup> Botting 1.

<sup>28</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (Part 1), Eastern Michigan University, 13 November 2011 <<http://people.emich.edu/acoykenda/uncanny1.htm>>.

<sup>29</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 269).

<sup>30</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 269).

<sup>31</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 272).

common-place”,<sup>32</sup> disputing his own evidence. The case is similar with the beating of the dead man’s heart in “The Tell-Tale Heart”, heard only by the half-crazed killer. Poe’s choice of unreliable narrators becomes a logical necessity in both these tales.

From Wayne C. Booth’s discussion of narrators and the distances<sup>33</sup> the narrative can assume, we must infer that Poe’s unreliable narrators are distant from the author, the readers of the narrative, and the other characters alike. Booth says of unreliability that “the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him.”<sup>34</sup> Poe’s mad killers always believe they are acting out of reason and are justified in their actions, which Poe obviously denies them. If we have a narrator who is himself unsure of what really happened, we can choose whether to believe at least a part of his narrative, or to dismiss his trustworthiness altogether. Franz Stanzel further clarifies Booth’s category of unreliability by proposing that this term be used only for narrators who consciously address a reader,<sup>35</sup> to satisfactorily distinguish them from reflectors.

The narratives of “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” become confessionals of horrors, where pretence at a first-hand account, coupled with what Booth calls the author’s “manipulating mood,”<sup>36</sup> is employed at thrilling the reader and making Poe’s narrative more dramatic. It is significant, however, that Poe’s narrators always make an attempt at sounding rational, though at the same time compromising their trustworthiness. Indeed, “the rationality of Poe’s heroes creates only a world of illusions”.<sup>37</sup> While the narrator of “The Black Cat” tells us “I neither expect nor solicit belief,”<sup>38</sup> he also assures us that he is not “mad” and does not “dream”.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” tries to persuade us of his sanity (though much less successfully) when he says, “Nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the thought of murder is never free of contrary emotions. The narrator of the “Tell-Tale Heart” even tells us that in fact, he “loved the old man,”<sup>41</sup> and that if it were not for his vulture eye, no crime need have been committed. The violation of a set rule, of everything that is human and natural, comes as the dark side of the human psyche and is never entirely justifiable; as the

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<sup>32</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 269).

<sup>33</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Second Edition (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 155-159.

<sup>34</sup> Booth 159.

<sup>35</sup> Stanzel 187.

<sup>36</sup> Booth 200.

<sup>37</sup> Procházka, Hrbata 152. \*my transl.

<sup>38</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 269).

<sup>39</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 269).

<sup>40</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 264).

<sup>41</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 264).

narrator of “The Black Cat” asks, “Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such?”<sup>42</sup>

There is one factor which greatly increases the narrators’ unreliability, namely that their perspective shifts back and forth between the “experiencing” and the “narrating I”.<sup>43</sup> The “narrating I” usually tries to distance itself to a degree from what the “experiencing I” committed in a bout of passion by a matter-of-fact description of events. However, the mental anguish seeps through at key dramatic moments, creating a thrillingly emotional syntax. As Walter Blair suggests, Poe’s tales are, to a great extent, based on the continued variations of feelings.<sup>44</sup> Finally, there is no clear line between what is to be taken as an attempt at objective truth and what discounted as a product of a temporarily disordered mind. The narrator of the “Black Cat” goes through the emotions of amiability, unwarranted cruelty and remorse, and while he is given a chance to redeem himself when the second cat walks into his life, he chooses instead to sink even deeper into depravation. As for “The Tell-Tale Heart”, the narrator’s emotions range from such opposite poles as the love for the old man to the desire to kill him and finally to the feeling of guilt. If we were tempted to make a distinction between the “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart,” it would be that while the narrator of the former is at least partially repentant and horrified of the crimes he committed, the latter only turns to us to advertise his supposed sagacity in murdering the old man and to remind us that we cannot “fancy [him] mad”.<sup>45</sup> Whereas the distance between the experiencing narrator and the confessing narrator in “The Black Cat” is vast because of his present remorse, the distance in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is nonexistent on other than a temporal level. One is a narrative of a repentant sinner, the other of an exulting madman, and it is uncertain to what extent we could be able to sympathize or even identify with either one of them at all.

When we have established that the basis of his narration is the successive altercation of a reasoned and unreasoned tone, we have to look at the specific tendencies of Poe’s style in more detail. The “unreasoned” tone is mainly characterized by the abundance of emotionally charged expressions, while the “reasoned” one employs a matter-of-fact diction. We cannot but be revolted by the consciously curt, unemotional evaluation the narrators give of their crimes, such as:

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<sup>42</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 271).

<sup>43</sup> Stanzel, 93-94.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Blair, “Poe’s Conception of Incident and Tone in the Tale”, *Modern Philology*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (May, 1944), pp. 228-240, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/434508.pdf>> 230.

<sup>45</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” (Carlson 265).

“I took from my waistcoat-pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket!”<sup>46</sup>

The version employed in “The Tell-Tale Heart” runs in this manner:

First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even his—could have detected any thing wrong.<sup>47</sup>

Now, let us contrast this with the emotional, melodramatic style of other passages, like this one from “The Tell-Tale Heart”:

“But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!”<sup>48</sup>

“The Black Cat” offers its own melodramatic version:

...It was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name—and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster had I dared—it was now, I say, the image of a hideous—of a ghastly thing—of the GALLOWS!—oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime—of Agony and of Death!<sup>49</sup>

These passages prove something we have suggested earlier; while the narrator tries to efface the distance between the man who kills in unreason and the man who tells us about it, he does not always succeed.

What Poe employs further to achieve the effect of tension and emotions run amok is the large number of various intensifiers, such as accentuated adverbs, for instance- “very, very

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<sup>46</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 270).

<sup>47</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” (Carlson 267).

<sup>48</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” (Carlson 268).

<sup>49</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 274).

dreadfully; how healthily-how calmly; very gradually; how wisely; oh so gently; how cunningly; slowly- very, very slowly; cautiously- oh, so cautiously; more than usually.”<sup>50</sup> These are only some of the intensified adverbs that appear within the first page of “The Tell-Tale Heart”. If we turn to “The Black Cat”, we find the following modified adjectives within the first page- “most wild; most homely; more calm, more logical, and far less excitable; very natural; so conspicuous; especially fond; most agreeable; remarkably large and beautiful; entirely black; not a little tintured.”<sup>51</sup> The list goes on. Of course, what this feature produces is a world where everything is accorded an emphatic quality, where nothing is common or just moderately felt. It is unsurprising that the style and action sometimes turn to pure melodrama. It is highly unlikely that the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” would have killed positioned above a tub to gather the old man’s blood. Burying an axe in a wife’s brain is just on the verge of the ludicrous, and the narrator’s ruminations about what to do with her dead body sound rather like something from a farce. This is the sort of thing that makes us smile at Poe’s immoderateness, as he seems to believe that murder needs to be as horrific as possible and a murder without blood and gore just would not do. If Poe is sometimes over the moon and provides a very good reason for many readers to consider him unskillful or disearnest, we have to realize that in his time, the horror story as we know it was only still in diapers and tales such as these would have been horrifying indeed to much of the contemporary audience.

Apart from intensifications, Poe employs language that can seem almost poetical, especially in the case of his unusual adjectives. There is the “paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man,” the “unfathomable longing”, “damnable atrocity”, “unutterable loathing”, “loathsome caresses”, “insufferable wo”, “rage more than demoniacal”, “death watches” or “the soul overcharged with awe”.<sup>52</sup> Poe also uses rather uncommon or downright old-fashioned verbs, such as “I would unburthen my soul, I delight to have allayed your suspicions, hearkening to the death watches, the animal evinced a disposition to accompany me, the crafty animal (...) forebore to present itself, the officers bade me accompany them, the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim,”<sup>53</sup> etc. His preference for active voice over the passive one is also to be noted, as it serves to further heighten the dramatic effect. We always have to keep in mind just how well Poe knew how to catch the attention of his readers, and it was not by creating a lowly villain, but by writing from the perspective of an educated gentleman and by employing a highly emotional diction of a troubled confession.

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<sup>50</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” (Carlson 265).

<sup>51</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 269).

<sup>52</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 269-276).

<sup>53</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 269-276).

Poe also uses frequent repetition and gradation, which serve to quicken the pace of the narrative at the crucial moments and to increase its impact, as the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” does when he narrates in this style:

“Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man’s terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment!”<sup>54</sup>

Or in the section near the end:

Oh God! what could I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they knew!<sup>55</sup>

Gradation is even more frequent in “The Black Cat”, possibly because the disintegration of the narrator’s personality is more gradual. It is used not only to dramatize the narrative, but also to make us feel its unrelenting inevitability:

“In their consequences, these events have terrified—have tortured—have destroyed me”, (...) “I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others.”<sup>56</sup>

It is singular how often Poe’s characters are at the mercy of fate, even if it is through their own folly that they call it upon themselves. The damning role of chance and the atmosphere of inevitability it creates are a signature mark of horror stories and help to bring about the certainty of punishment. A vile deed must be paid for, and so a second cat comes to revenge the first and a still beating heart announces the death of the old man. An evil end is inevitable, and though worldly means (the police) are used to finally facilitate it, it is always effectuated in a preternatural, uncanny way, thereby heightening the unreliability of the

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<sup>54</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” (Carlson 266-267). \*italics mine

<sup>55</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” (Carlson 268). \*italics mine

<sup>56</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 269, 270). \*italics mine

narrator and increasing the reader's confusion. It would be a misreading, however, to consider Poe a hidden moralist, since the primary attention is never accorded to punishment, but rather to a play of horror and fantasy demonstrating the pervasiveness of human fallibility.

All these devices are formed with the view of dramatizing the narrative and shifting the narrator away from all possible identification with the reader. Poe's goal is to mystify us and he arrives there by mystifying the narrator. What could be more effective than giving us a glimpse into a mind riddled by alcoholic vapors or insane imaginings of a neurotic, slowly slipping deeper and deeper into madness? What could be more convincing than a narrator telling us "I know not how or why it was,"<sup>57</sup> at one time describing a scene to us with a surprising clarity of detail, at another trying to remember back through the haze of oblivion? Poe realized that a mere detailing of impossible events "à la Blackwood" would not be enough and that he would have to find a way to unite reason and fantasy. Poe's horror stories may seem to us rather as something come out of a nightmare, vaguely possible but terrifying to believe. It is the narrators' blind belief that what they see is, or could be, real that pushes them over the edge. Working unswervingly toward that one effect, horror, and dramatizing the narrative along the way as much as possible was for Poe a conscientious process, one that needed close attention and continuous perfection. "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" with their dark, unrelenting and hazy atmosphere, drawing heavily upon the uncanny and mystifying the reader about the basic values, are a brilliant exploration of the labyrinthine realm of the human psyche and two horror tale masterpieces.

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<sup>57</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat" (Carlson 273).

## 4. Variations of Distance: Non-Identical Existential Plane and Judgment

The question of how to narrate a horror tale other than through the medium of a narrator at the very center of events is a crucial one. The requirement that authors should be objective<sup>58</sup> crumbles down in any case where the author tries to manipulate<sup>59</sup> our emotions or views in a set way. In any text where there is an unreliable narrator, where overt satire is used, or where the narrator gives us his own views on a tale before even proceeding to tell it, objectiveness is not viable. The narrator is always somehow involved in the narrated events, whether he shares the same existential plane with the other characters or transmits his opinion on them. However, what degree of involvement is desirable? If the desired effect is making the reader shudder, is it more desirable to place the narrator in the key role, to draw him on a par with the other characters, or to remove him from them- and if that, to what degree? Should the tone adopted be dispassionate or involved?<sup>60</sup> And if we have a story narrated from the outside perspective, should the narrator presume to judge his characters along with the readers or just report on them? Poe, so very keen on defining his own methods, must have been concerned about this question and, as we shall see, when he discharged the unreliable narrator in favor of another, he was very conscious of the space he was according him in his tale. In the three stories discussed in this chapter, we are confronted with narrators at a varied distance from the world they describe.<sup>61</sup> More frustratingly, perhaps, we shall discover that Poe's narrator often tends to voice his opinion less and less as the narrative progresses, and we often cannot be certain (and it would be trifling and superfluous to try) whether some of the judgments are his own or some of his characters'. Let us now begin our analysis with the narrator who, of the three tales chosen here, most persistently reminds us of the act of telling and, therefore, of himself- with the narrator of "Hop-Frog".

"Hop-Frog", being essentially a variation of the fairytale, presents us with an engaged narrator, one who is conscious about his own role as a mediator between us and the fictional world, and who is trying to draw us into the world he paints. We can see that from the way he

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<sup>58</sup> Booth 67.

<sup>59</sup> Booth 200.

<sup>60</sup> Booth 158.

<sup>61</sup> Booth 156.

refers to the king he describes as “our king”, as if we participated in the telling and were as familiar with the characters as the narrator himself. The boundary between the real world and the imaginary one is further breached by the fact that the teller says he “never knew anyone so keenly alive to a joke as the king was,”<sup>62</sup> which would suggest he is located within, and not outside, the fictional world; yet in the same paragraph, he mentions Rabelais and Voltaire. The familiarizing devices are common in any fiction where the narrator tries to form a bond of sympathy and concurrence with the reader. On the other hand, phrases such as “at the date of my narrative”<sup>63</sup> suggest a temporal remoteness and locate the narrator safely outside of the world of characters. What is especially interesting about this story, and goes hand in hand with a folk tale narrative, is the way the narrator pretends ignorance about certain basic facts in the story he himself narrates. Uncertainties such as “I believe the name ‘Hop-Frog’ was not that given to the dwarf by his sponsors at baptism”, “I am not able to say, with precision, from what country Hop-Frog originally came”, “On some grand state occasion—I forgot what—” or “Why they hesitated I never could tell”, together with tentative expressions as “it would seem” or “it is supposed”<sup>64</sup> create the illusion that this narrator is by no means privy to everything that happens in the world he talks about and establish him as a very playful narrative voice. We have no other choice but to accept his view of the king, the ministers, and others as genuine. The narrator’s stance is, however, complicated in the case of the protagonist. Is the narrator actually on the side of Hop-Frog, or does he rather oscillate somewhere between pity for him and revulsion? On the other hand, the dwarf’s particular shortcomings in beauty are not supposed to invoke antipathy, as is the case with the “large, corpulent, oily”<sup>65</sup> ministers and the king who “does not scruple to strike a defenseless girl”.<sup>66</sup> In the end, the cripple emerges as a rebellious and pitiable grotesque.

In “Hop-Frog”, Poe uses one structural element to a great extent throughout the tale—irony. It is most pronounced at the beginning of the tale, gradually giving way to a matter-of-fact account. There are several jibes at the practices of the court, such as when the narrator talks about the “crumbs that fell from the royal table”,<sup>67</sup> “the heavy wisdom of the seven wise men”, the fatness of the ministers or the lack of wits they display:

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<sup>62</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Hop-Frog” (Carlson 145).

<sup>63</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Hop-Frog” (Carlson 146).

<sup>64</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Hop-Frog” (Carlson 146-153).

<sup>65</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Hop-Frog” (Carlson 145).

<sup>66</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Hop-Frog” (Carlson 153).

<sup>67</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Hop-Frog” (Carlson 146).

“Our king, as a matter of course, retained his ‘fool.’ The fact is, he required something in the way of folly—if only to counterbalance the heavy wisdom of the seven wise men who were his ministers—not to mention himself.”<sup>68</sup>

Given what we have already learned about the king’s preference for “practical jokes” and “breadth” in a jest<sup>69</sup> in the preceding lines, this statement cannot be taken seriously. It is undoubtedly comic, but the snubbing tone lets us know that in reality, there is nothing much to laugh at. We do feel deeply sorry for a misused cripple whose very name carries the contempt of everyone around him and who has been deprived of all human sympathy excepting Tripetta’s. The narrator’s contempt for the court becomes even more obvious when he starts speaking of the king’s masquerade, and while he introduces it as “some grand state occasion”, he subsequently tells us he does not remember what it was. In phrases such as the following, the actual opinion of the court seeps through the narrator’s voice:

“I am not able to say, with precision, from what country Hop-Frog originally came. It was from some barbarous region, however, that no person ever heard of—a vast distance from the court of our king.”<sup>70</sup>

This unkind and hypocritical sentiment very obviously does not belong to the narrator, but to the king and his court themselves. It is interesting how moral judgment permeates even this overtly unfeeling statement.

There are points of even subtler irony, and the king’s stupidity can be inferred from the very language he uses. We encounter no haughty and arrogant short sentences with suitably aristocratic undertones (as we do in “Metzengerstein”); what we hear is a jolly dumb-headed middle aged fat man who just happens to be a king as if by accident, and whose authority is derived merely from his position, not from anything that would command respect inherently. This shows us that Poe knew very well the constructive importance of language. When we hear Hop-Frog himself, it is in diction far superior to that of the whole court while not necessarily too educated. Also, direct speech is much more pronounced in “Hop-Frog” than in many of Poe’s other tales. In most of his stories, Poe refrains from it altogether or uses it only very sparingly. This is undoubtedly because every dialogue in the narrative is a means

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<sup>68</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Hop-Frog” (Carlson 146).

<sup>69</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Hop-Frog” (Carlson 146).

<sup>70</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Hop-Frog” (Carlson 147).

of retardation, and that is what Poe stands against. His tightly bound, effect-orientated narrative has no place in it for superfluity and it is only used when another effect is desired. We hear the king and Hop-Frog discourse at all because the image of a dim-witted tyrant as opposed to an oppressed subject has to be made clear to us, and there is no better way than having us hear them both speak.

When the narrator tells us that “several of the great continental ‘powers’ still retained their ‘fools,’”<sup>71</sup> the question is why he would put the two words in quotation marks. The probable answer is that it is because the “powers” in truth hold no actual power and the “fools” are not really fools. Irony is implicit also when the king tells Hop-Frog that he will “make a man of him”.<sup>72</sup> What he does not realize is that Hop-Frog is a man, not a sort of half-animal to be kept, named at will and trampled underfoot for pleasure. Instead of the king making a man from someone he considers to be an animal, Hop-Frog makes an animal from him when he forces the king to pretend to be an ourang-outang. The line between man and beast is subverted, and who we are turns us into beasts rather than what we look like. Once again, Poe points to the underlying bestiality of man by employing grotesquery. Hop-Frog is a fool, a dwarf and a cripple at the same time, frog-like, monkey-like, animal-toothed, and therefore someone we could laugh at. Underlying all that is a deeply felt menace, however. He features in the story as something of a Romantic outcast, existing on the borders of society and fighting its tyranny.<sup>73</sup> The mystification over the basic facts regarding Hop-Frog offers the narrator a chance to establish him as an unpredictable entity. Everything about him is uncertain, including his very identity and appearance. Finally, we, and even more the king and his ministers, are not sure whether he is someone to laugh at or someone to be scared of. As a grotesque, the dwarf has to be assessed as motley and even degenerated in appearance, overall unpredictable and unknowable. While the king and his court are persistently being classed as archetypes, Hop-Frog becomes an unknown quality and the source of surprise.

In the end, there is nothing cheerful in the jester’s jest. Romanticism no longer has any place for a purely restorative laughter,<sup>74</sup> and while there is laughter on the king’s and the court’s side, the reader cannot laugh with them, only at them. Even though there is a masquerade where the attendants are to be made fools, the king’s jest is not perpetrated with the intention of evoking merriment but of causing fear. Hop-Frog’s own last jest is anything

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<sup>71</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Hop-Frog” (Carlson 146).

<sup>72</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Hop-Frog” (Carlson 150).

<sup>73</sup> Botting 98.

<sup>74</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination : Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist; trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006) 199.

but comical. In the end, the narrator abandons all the grotesque sidelines and focuses on the revenge of the long-suffering outcast. In this story, we are faced with an environment where, irrespective of the relative proportions of good and evil, the narrator assumes the side of those oppressed and does not stoop to moralize when his heroes jointly commit a horrible murder. As in all folk tales, evil has to be punished and cruelty on the side of the heroes is justified because in the act of its execution, it becomes an impersonal act of punishment. In “Hop-Frog”, “The Mask of the Red Death”, and possibly even “Metzengerstein”, Poe disciplines temporal authority and offers a moral solution to an interplay of opposing forces.

In “Metzengerstein”, Poe comes perhaps closest to the horror of Germany he was trying to break from (indeed, Poe’s original subtitle was “A Tale in Imitation of the German”).<sup>75</sup> Baron Berlifitzing, assuming the shape of a preternatural horse, revenges the destruction of his ancestral seat and the slights previously inflicted by a neighboring upstart aristocrat. Poe repeatedly draws on the uncanniness of animal-inflicted horror, but this time, it represents a personalized threat inasmuch as it is an incarnation rather than a punishment by a mere animal (if perhaps possessing supernatural qualities). As was the case with the cat in “The Black Cat”, the baron is offered a warning about the supernatural character of the animal that evokes both admiration and fear in him. The letters branded on the horse’s forehead, instead of causing fear, however, provide Metzengerstein with glee. Equating his enemy with a mere horse, one he can ride and, as he thinks, control, understandably constitutes a triumph of his pride.

Already at the beginning, the narrator establishes an expectation of future terrors when he tells us as a fact that “HORROR and fatality have been stalking abroad in all ages.”<sup>76</sup> “Metzengerstein”, as “Hop-Frog”, is a story of revenge displayed in a continental Gothic tale setting,<sup>77</sup> and Poe gave it a narrator removed both intellectually and morally from the events he sets out to narrate.<sup>78</sup> In contrast to the teller of “Hop-Frog”, he does not adopt an ironic stand; rather, he offers us his personal moral and educated judgment, distancing himself from the Hungarian characters he describes. As he goes on, he fortifies his distance by speaking of “some points in the Hungarian superstition which were fast verging to absurdity”.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, he recounts something that seems to have been made known to him by common report, probably by the superstitious Hungarians themselves, and he transmits it to us although

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<sup>75</sup> Pattee 124.

<sup>76</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Metzengerstein” (Carlson 109).

<sup>77</sup> Botting 31.

<sup>78</sup> Booth 156.

<sup>79</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Metzengerstein” (Carlson 109).

“of the doctrines themselves—that is, of their falsity, or of their probability—I say nothing.”<sup>80</sup> He even refuses to identify with the Hungarians as a people when he says, “They—the Hungarians—differed very essentially from their Eastern authorities.”<sup>81</sup> This simple and outwardly insignificant sentence not only tells us that the narrator is not a Hungarian and does not hold their views, but also that he is not even a European. He is therefore someone divided from the people he talks of not only on the basis of geographical distance, but also by virtue of a different cultural background. As the story progresses, he begins to concentrate on Baron Metzengerstein himself, and his intrusions turn from skeptical to downright damning:

Shameful debaucheries—flagrant treacheries—unheard-of atrocities—gave his trembling vassals quickly to understand that no servile submission on their part—no punctilios of conscience on his own—were thenceforward to prove any security against the remorseless fangs of a petty Caligula.<sup>82</sup>

It is not only his own outlook, however, that we are offered. As we go on, we can distinguish three distinct levels of opinion. We hear Metzengerstein’s own contemptuous opinion of his servants, his rival and his own views upon his horse, but also the outlook of the people surrounding him. The onlookers, for some reason, tend to be always grouped. There are the “enthusiastic admirers” of the baron, “the imperious nobility”, “the charitable”, the “reasonable men,” “the most imaginative”, “the most skeptical and phlegmatic”, or all seen collectively as “the neighborhood” and the “gaping crowd”.<sup>83</sup> This fact increases the impression of Metzengerstein’s isolation in his fight against the supernatural and at the same time provides the narrator with an observing audience. The role of gossip and observation is also apparent in phrases such as “little speculation was afloat”, “the unanimous opinion of the neighborhood”, “the widow of the unfortunate Count Berlifitzing was even heard to express a hope...”<sup>84</sup> “dark hints, of a more equivocal nature, were current among the multitude” or “it was also to be observed”.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps the most pronounced opinion of the characters, offered with a pinch of irony, is the one they have of the misshapen page, “whose deformities were in everybody’s way, and whose opinions were of the least possible importance.”<sup>86</sup> The page

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<sup>80</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Metzengerstein” (Carlson 109).

<sup>81</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Metzengerstein” (Carlson 109).

<sup>82</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Metzengerstein” (Carlson 110-111).

<sup>83</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Metzengerstein” (Carlson 110-114).

<sup>84</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Metzengerstein” (Carlson 110-116).

<sup>85</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Metzengerstein” (Carlson 114).

<sup>86</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Metzengerstein” (Carlson 115).

provides yet another warning of the baron's impending doom but is naturally heeded no more than the tapestry, the horse's brand or the permeating symbolic imagery of fire.

Indeed, the act of seeing and yet not seeing is accentuated in the story. Metzengerstein looks at the tapestry in his castle unconsciously and without perceiving its peculiarities, "his gaze return[ing] mechanically to the wall",<sup>87</sup> the animal reciprocating his stare. The actual horse's gaze constitutes additional terror because it is through the eyes rather than anything else that its otherworldliness can be felt. The atmosphere of mystery and terrible foreboding is supported by means of various well-chosen adjectives (a method also very noticeable in "The Masque of the Red Death"). Metzengerstein's possessions, however "vast" they may be, are pleasant in no other way than that which their studied splendor can elicit. Adjectives such as "vast and desolate", "rich although faded", "shadowy and majestic", or "dark, tall"<sup>88</sup> suggest a feeling of being surrounded by ominous, unreal and threatening objects that can offer no real comfort. To give this a term, Metzengerstein finds himself in a sublime milieu. Of course, the fiery horse, an incarnation of Metzengerstein's arch-enemy and the baron's final bane, also abounds in uncanny predicates, such as "enormous and unnaturally colored", "furious", "suspicious and untractable", "unnatural, impetuous and fiery-colored", "ferocious and demon-like"<sup>89</sup>, etc. Its eyes are "energetic and human" and gleaming with "a fiery and unusual red", and its "distended lips" contain "gigantic and disgusting teeth."<sup>90</sup> The baron's character is not described with any more lenience. He commits "shameful debaucheries", "flagrant treacheries" and "unheard-of atrocities", is "remorseless", "fiendish", "peremptory", "dissolute", "haughty and laconic", "atrocious and reckless", "morbid", and has an "expression of determined malignancy."<sup>91</sup> As if this atmosphere was not malignant enough, Poe makes use of fire, which permeates the narrative and is described as having a "ruddy" glare, and being "dense and livid", "ungovernable", "chaotic" and "preternatural."<sup>92</sup> Of course, while fire actually really breaks out in the narrative, we meet it most pervasively in the qualities of Metzengerstein and the horse themselves. Nothing about them is subdued and dispassionate. Fire, therefore, is not only an outward sign but also an inner quality, and just as a real fire would, it finally consumes its bearers.

Metzengerstein as a character is closest of the three tales we deal with here to Poe's unreliable narrators discussed in the preceding chapter. Although he does not narrate his own

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<sup>87</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Metzengerstein" (Carlson 111-112).

<sup>88</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Metzengerstein" (Carlson 111).

<sup>89</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Metzengerstein" (Carlson 111-115).

<sup>90</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Metzengerstein" (Carlson 112).

<sup>91</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Metzengerstein" (Carlson 110- 113).

<sup>92</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Metzengerstein" (Carlson 111-116).

story, he is as uncertain of what is truly happening around him as both the narrators of “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart”. He even forms an unbreakable bond with an animal that turns out to be a punishment on him sent from out of the grave, as is the case with the narrator of “The Black Cat”. And what else could have tempted him to acquire a horse whose true nature he must have suspected from the beginning and which made him shudder at times, had it not been for that “spirit of perverseness” that, in Poe, is “one of the primitive impulses of the human heart”?<sup>93</sup> His downfall, however, is not caused by alcohol or madness, but by an overweening ambition. The horse and Metzengerstein both represent “nature, wild and untamable,”<sup>94</sup> and through their unconformability merit their downfall.

We shall end this chapter by discussing the story in which the narrator’s overt commentary and judgment all but disappears, but where the atmosphere of gradation and a careful building up of an echo of grotesque carnival and madness perfectly substitutes all other devices. In “The Masque of the Red Death”, Poe draws on the fact that we fear that which we do not understand and cannot grasp. As Susan Stewart asserts, “images of decay in the horror story present the sites of the known reshaped into the no-longer definable.”<sup>95</sup> To be confronted with Death himself, the apogee of the unknown and indefinable, is what makes this particular story one of the best in the horror domain Poe has written.

In “The Mask of the Red Death”, the narrator plunges straight in *medias res*. “The “Red Death” had long devastated the country”,<sup>96</sup> he tells us, and with this he establishes the almost laconic tone, dependent on simple sentences, which pervades the whole tale. In the first paragraph Poe proceeds to paint an atmosphere of “the redness and the horror of blood”.<sup>97</sup> It cannot be disputed that “The Masque of the Red Death” reads almost like a picture. Poe does not seem to write, and the narrator to narrate, as much as paint for us a picture of a mad revel in the times of “knights and dames” and of “castellated abbeys”,<sup>98</sup> abounding in color, fever and a masked terror whose advent is measured by time as unrelenting as Poe’s gradating prose. If the narrator does appear, it is only to remind us of the process of storytelling, such as when he says “but first let me tell...” or “as I have painted”.<sup>99</sup> He does not provide us with his personal commentary and even when expressing a judgment about his protagonist, prince Prospero, in saying that “the Prince Prospero was happy and

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<sup>93</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat” (Carlson 271).

<sup>94</sup> Botting 12.

<sup>95</sup> Susan Stewart, “The Epistemology of the Horror Story”, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 95, No. 375 (Jan. - Mar., 1982), pp. 33-50, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/540021.pdf>> 42.

<sup>96</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 164).

<sup>97</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 164).

<sup>98</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 164).

<sup>99</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 164, 167).

dauntless and sagacious,”<sup>100</sup> it is rather a self-opinion of the prince himself than the narrator’s own view. When the narrator says, “the external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think,”<sup>101</sup> it is again not his own opinion, but that of the courtiers. By not appealing to our sympathies or reason, the narrator does not require anything else from us than reading with a bated breath. Indeed, he is very insistent in creating a purely sensuous mood, where things that are seen and heard are minutely described and touch is required to be certain of basic realities. Inanimate objects are given a particular life of their own. Windows “look”, corridors “pursue” and “follow”, dreams “stalk”, “writhe” and “take hue”, and the ebony clock has a life that “expires”.<sup>102</sup> This effect is especially noticeable in the most dramatic scene of the tale, where Prospero confronts Death. Instead of the narrator telling us that the prince cried out and dropped his dagger, we hear that “there was a sharp cry—and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet”.<sup>103</sup> The adjectives used in this tale are here not to delineate personal characteristics but to create a certain mood, a mood of bright voluptuousness and gay insanity of a masquerade contrasted sharply with the austerity and simplicity of death. No matter how many brightly colored and winding corridors, how many courtiers, walls and gates separate the hooded figure from the prince, it comes uninvited and unlooked for and makes an end to all worldly folly. It is impossible not to be reminded of the medieval wheel of fortune.

Of course, the main theme of the story presupposes this curtness of the narrator. Why should he dissemble when, in the end, the fatal stroke has been so swift? Why should he decorate his narrative with more when the palace of the prince offers splendor enough? In “The Masque of the Red Death”, Poe has approached closest to the tightly bound tale of effect he set out to espouse. Here, we are offered virtually no insight into the minds and hearts of the characters, other than into their fear springing from the knowledge that each chime of the ebony clock brings them closer to the inevitable. The message here is ‘you cannot escape your fate, and you cannot escape the passage of Time’. And Poe knows very well how to dramatize its progress when he offers us a whole paragraph of the chiming clock and the resultant stillness of all life in the present tense rather than the past:

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<sup>100</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 164).

<sup>101</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 164).

<sup>102</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 165-169).

<sup>103</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 168).

“And, anon, there strikes the ebony clock which stands in the hall of the velvet. And then, for a moment, all is still, and all is silent save the voice of the clock. The dreams are stiff-frozen as they stand.”<sup>104</sup>

What strikes the reader most about “The Masque of the Red Death” is the elaborate creation of the effect of horror through absolute contrasts. We are confronted with concepts such as “within” and “without”, “ingress” and “egress,”<sup>105</sup> right and left, free and barred vision, gaudiness and poverty, horror and gaiety, sound and silence, continuity and interruption, life and death. There are even two opposing protagonists in the story; the question it, is the main character Prospero, no longer prosperous, or is it death? The masquerade seems like a carnival, but it is no longer a site of the cheerful merrymaking of the Middle Ages. As Mikhail Bakhtin affirms, in the Romantic tradition, “life and death are perceived solely within the limits of the sealed-off individual life” where “life is unrepeatable, and death an irremediable end”.<sup>106</sup> Although Poe writes about feasting and merrymaking, these timeless activities are punctured by the voice of clock, which reminds the revelers of the nearing death and which, significantly, loses its “life” when all is over.

Poe is also very conscious about his choice of expressions. Some of the words he employs to historicize the narrative are, once again, archaic or unusual, such as “castellated”, “shrouded”, “hearken”, “perforce”, “anon”, “sable”, “habiliments”, “aloft,”<sup>107</sup> and others. He tries to create an atmosphere of uneasy expectation together with a feeling of immeasurable riches about to be ripped away from the possessor, and for that reason, he often uses segments of speech coordinated by the conjunction and, or indeed whole sentences beginning with it. We get to know that Prince Prospero was “happy and dauntless and sagacious”, that his friends were “hale and light-hearted”, his palace “extensive and magnificent” and the wall protecting it “strong and lofty”.<sup>108</sup> These are only those that occur within the first page of the narrative. Naturally, this feature does not appear with select words only but permeates the whole tale, such as in this case:

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. (...) And one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died

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<sup>104</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 166).

<sup>105</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 164).

<sup>106</sup> Bakhtin 199.

<sup>107</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 164-168).

<sup>108</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 164).

each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.<sup>109</sup>

This constant repetition is continued in the case of “here” or “there” throughout the story and there is also a certain tendency of giving amounts, and that not only in the case of “the seven chambers” or “a thousand retainers.”<sup>110</sup> To give an instance of all of the elements mentioned above occurring in a few sentences, let us quote the following extract:

There were much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm. (...) There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust.<sup>111</sup>

Significant numbers are an element present in all the three tales discussed here and as such, we can perhaps say more about them, starting with the eponymous number three. In “Metzengerstein”, there are three equerries who bring the horse to the baron. Metzengerstein’s initial debaucheries last “for a space of three days”<sup>112</sup> and in “The Masque of the Red Death”, the ebony clock interrupts the masquerade exactly three times before the entrance of Death. In “Hop-Frog”, the dwarf is trebled in value in the eyes of the king because he is a cripple, a dwarf and a fool at the same time. Number seven is present in the seven king’s ministers in “Hop-Frog” and the seven chambers in Prospero’s palace. Finally, the significance of number one cannot be forgotten. In “Metzengerstein”, there is one “insignificant and misshapen little page”<sup>113</sup> who dares to speak out the truth about his master’s true relation to the horse and is unsurprisingly disregarded, and in “The Masque of the Red Death”, there is the one significant room with the one ebony clock. Of course, as for number twelve, we only have to determine how many times significant actions take place at midnight in Poe’s narratives. The function of numbers is evocative of folk tales and here serves the same purpose, to magnify the royal splendor and to accentuate significant facts.

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<sup>109</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 168-169). \*italics mine

<sup>110</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 164).

<sup>111</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 166). \*italics mine

<sup>112</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Metzengerstein” (Carlson 110).

<sup>113</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Metzengerstein” (Carlson 115).

We have spoken of repetition in Poe before, but in “The Masque of the Red Death” in particular it seems exaggerated to the extreme. Its purpose is obvious. Where there is an unrelenting reiteration, there is a studied effect. The unwearied recurrence produces a feeling of an unavoidable tendency in one direction, toward the final end, where all that has to be said can be said curtly and dispassionately:

“And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.”<sup>114</sup>

The narrators we encounter in “Metzengerstein”, “The Masque of the Red Death” and “Hop-Frog”, as opposed to those discussed in the first chapter, are such whose existential plane is not shared with the characters themselves. We are confronted with a teller who has the benefit of time distance that enables him to evaluate the happenings of the story itself morally, skeptically, and ironically (Booth’s evaluation of narrative distances)<sup>115</sup> and thus present it to a modern audience. We meet narrators trying to set themselves up at a distance from the events narrated (in “Metzengerstein”), narrators who, on the other hand, are not wholly dispassionate about their characters (“Hop-Frog”), and narrators who barely appear at all and rather assay to paint a picture than try to convince us about anything. Often, indeed, they seemingly disappear from the narrative altogether for extensive stretches of time. On the other hand, almost evaluation can be seen as their own voice, whether offered directly or indirectly, as they confront us with views that could not possibly be any of the characters’. While the stances of the narrators differ, the overall tone of the tales is that of horror, not dependent on time period or surroundings, which are indeed heterogeneous. “Hop Frog” is set in the typically folktale time though the narrator obviously comes from the contemporary period (which is proved in the fact that he knows Rabelais and Voltaire).<sup>116</sup> “The Masque of the Red Death” is set very probably in something very much like medieval Italy (though again, the narrator is contemporary as we can see from his knowledge of Hernani),<sup>117</sup> while “Metzengerstein’s” setting is much more contemporary, indeed probably the Romantic or pre-Romantic Hungary. Poe draws on the connection of Gothic with half-ancient, half-imaginative surroundings,<sup>118</sup> creating a play of fantasy and transitivity of human traits. In these stories, we are confronted with “the cruelty of the medieval circumstances”, the

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<sup>114</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 169).

<sup>115</sup> Booth 156.

<sup>116</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Hop-Frog” (Carlson 146).

<sup>117</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (Carlson 166).

<sup>118</sup> Botting 48.

“terrifying power of the castle gentry”<sup>119</sup> or both, exemplified. While “The Masque of the Red Death” and “Hop-Frog” make use of the grotesque, “Metzengerstein” employs rather the Gothic principles of the eighteenth century such as old castles with mysterious tapestries, tyrannous barons and, of course, the final cloud of smoke resembling a horse, deeply evocative of *The Castle of Otranto*.

Let it be said in conclusion that it is interesting that even in these tales, Poe never actually dispenses with the figure of the narrator and there is always an “I” present, though only as an outside narrator rather than an actual character. At the beginnings of these tales, Poe always makes us aware of the role of the narrator as mediator in transmitting his own perspective in a tale. This sets him on the same level with the reader, that of a contemporary rational human being, and enables the narrator to make an agreement of shared values with the reader. The narrator is definitely not there just by accident but serves to create this standpoint and mediates the narrative to us as something consciously related, not merely noted down. His presence gives Poe an opportunity to hide behind an anonymous teller, guiding our footsteps along the path of narration.

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<sup>119</sup> Procházka, Hrbata 137. \*my translation

## 5.How (Not) To Write a Blackwood Article: Poe's Satires

Of all the stories Poe has written, his satires are possibly most problematic with the modern reader. What creates the stumbling block is the fact that what Poe was parodying is now no longer as present in our general consciousness as Gothic tales were in Poe's readers' minds. Stories such as "How to Write a Blackwood Article" or "A Predicament" can only be fully appreciated in the context of the Gothic literary trend of Poe's day (and thus ideally in connection with Poe's horror stories), and it is questionable whether their humor can be embraced on its own merit. While the characters of these two stories certainly are comical, the very fact that their experiences are completely disjointed from reality, that they keep alluding to much that is unintelligible to a modern reader, and that Poe tends to opt for an exuberant, exaggerated irony wrought with farce rather than choosing a subtler approach, can impair our appreciation of them and make us skeptical of Poe's powers of humor. Further complications are caused by the fact that Poe himself propagates what he elsewhere parodies. The reader may justifiably be led to ask what, then, Poe's true *métier* is. Is he serious in his Gothic tales or does he discount them with his satires?

A plausible view is that Poe's true forte was parody and that he wrote about horror only because he knew what the audience demanded and was forced to gratify its appetite for the fashionable "bizarreries".<sup>120</sup> Poe was even advised by a literary critic on continuing to write in the comic vein; as the critic said, "It is of the very best stamp, and I am sure you will do wonders for yourself in the comic, I mean the serio tragic comic."<sup>121</sup> The italicized last words show us that even Poe's contemporaries had problems in throwing his stories in any one category and rightly so, since it is highly suggestive that Poe himself did not intend to be easily classifiable. Another critic offered an even better piece of advice, one that Poe seems to have subsequently followed, that is "to apply his fine humor and his expensive acquirements to more familiar subjects of satire (...) For Satire to be relished, it is necessary that it should be leveled at something with which readers are familiar."<sup>122</sup> That is exactly what Poe does in the two tales discussed in this chapter. Readers of the popular magazines of the Blackwood caliber would have known how to appreciate satire leveled at the extravaganza of what they read, and those who should consider the currently popular literature beneath their notice could in turn enjoy Poe tearing it to pieces. Procházka suggests that "Poe's grotesques are always a

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<sup>120</sup> Pattee 121

<sup>121</sup> Pattee 121.

<sup>122</sup> Pattee 122.

part of an intelligent play with the reader (...) where the main objective is shocking him, confusing his expectations and finally providing an unexpected solution”;<sup>123</sup> in other words just what happens in “A Predicament”. A good writer knows how to parody his own style, how to take up a pen to laugh at its extravagancies and the next day go about his usual business. Perhaps most tempting, however, is to suppose that Poe’s comic pieces were written just as much for his own sake as for the readers’. Whether we accept Daniel Royot’s theory that Poe wrote humor out of basically therapeutic reasons<sup>124</sup> or not, it was a style he recurred to, and whenever he did, it was to satirize something that was very much in the vogue. The question is whether the stories’ time-boundedness increases or decreases their merit with subsequent generations of readers, though of course humor is by nature always subjective and never easily classed.

We shall see that Poe’s humor in “How to Write a Blackwood Article” and “A Predicament” rests heavily on one of the elements of the grotesque, namely a species of humorous mechanical repetition. In *Romantismus a romantismy*, Martin Procházka discusses this element in connection with another one of Poe’s satires, “The Man That Was Used Up”, and establishes the story’s association with mechanism and technology.<sup>125</sup> While “How to Write a Blackwood Article” and “A Predicament” are parodies of American literary culture, “The Man That Was Used Up” is a parody of the American ethos of hero worship. The object of focus in this tale, an eponymous heroic Indian-fighter, is not a man but a mechanical construct of a collection of artificial body parts.<sup>126</sup> His very name, John A.B.C. Smith, hints at his constructedness while rooting him firmly in the American context. In the tale, a supposed hero becomes a laughing-stock because his body is mechanically assembled together thanks to the technological wonders of the mechanized nation and “rebirth” occurs as a farcical repetition of the original identity. The other characters function as hinderers of the narrator’s quest and a straight acquisition of his goal, getting to know what happened to Smith, is made almost impossible.

The language play in the story is a very important element since the grotesque effect is achieved by machine-like redundant repetition<sup>127</sup> and frustrating interruption of dialogue. In fact, the very language is just as mechanized and inflated as the body of the general himself. While the whole aura of heroism and the general’s formidable voice induce feelings of deep

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<sup>123</sup> Procházka, *Hrbata* 152.

<sup>124</sup> Daniel Royot, “Poe’s Humor”, *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 57.

<sup>125</sup> Procházka, *Hrbata* 152.

<sup>126</sup> Procházka, *Hrbata* 152.

<sup>127</sup> Procházka, *Hrbata* 152.

admiration in the narrator, he is to find out that there is a decided difference between reality and myth. The dialogue moves ahead on the basis of deferred expectations and the narrator fails to learn anything definite about the mysterious man up until the very last scene. When he tries to glean some information from his other acquaintance, the discourse is forever being interrupted just before the moment of a possible revelation (the cue sentence “he’s the man...”<sup>128</sup>), and what is actually said does not confer any information (rather distorts it, as in the case of Byron’s dramatic poem “Manfred”, here being reconstructed into “Man-Friday”). As we shall see, in “How to Write a Blackwood Article” and “A Predicament” there is a similar tendency to repetition, meaninglessness and interruption, the same play with names and the same disparity between linguistic volubility and lack of actual incident. Mechanism (as opposed to the growing natural plant of the Romantic imagination) is intrinsically connected with Poe’s grotesque, but as a faulty construct would, it produces only iterative and redundant actions and sounds. In the end of “The Man That Was Used Up” the mythical hero is exposed as a fraud and undergoes a gruesome dismemberment akin to Psyche Zenobia’s in “A Predicament”. His enchanting voice is revealed as a product of an artificial tongue rather than a natural attribute and our belief in any genuineness in the tale collapses. Body is revealed as a mechanism as well as the language, and the cyclical eloquence of its possessor ends in a final note of absurdity.

We shall return to this issue in connection with the technique of “A Predicament” but for the moment, let us turn to the question of the narrator of the two stories at hand. It cannot be doubted that for humor to fulfill its purpose, the choice of a fitting narrator is crucial. In “How to Write a Blackwood Article”, Poe chooses a narrator located inside the world of recounted events<sup>129</sup> though extremely limited in terms of accurate perception and judgment, which is, of course, the main feature of Poe’s irony. In “A Predicament”, however, the situation gets even more interesting. What we encounter here is, at first glance, the very same thing, but with a significant difference; Psyche seems to be both the narrating, and the experiencing I,<sup>130</sup> and that at the same time! The question is, if Psyche dies at the end of the tale, who is telling her story?

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<sup>128</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man That Was Used Up”, *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*, August 1839, pp. 66, The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, Inc., 16 September 2011, 24 November 2011 <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/mnusda.htm>>.

<sup>129</sup> Stanzel 66.

<sup>130</sup> Stanzel 93.

In the two stories we discuss in this chapter, Poe opts for the satiric obvious; the complete reversal of character, tone, and incident from that which he himself would use.<sup>131</sup> The result is a lively caricature of a self-opinionated New England spinster in the character of Psyche Zenobia, who has nothing better on her hands than establishing herself as a learned authoress/heroine and sets out on a quest to write something that has as yet not been paralleled. Unsurprisingly, this choice of narrator works to a wonder. It is not only that Poe seems to know exactly just what passes through such a mind, he also knows how best to present it to his reader, namely by a wonder of verbal diarrhea, starting (but by no means ending) with:

I presume everybody has heard of me. My name is the Signora Psyche Zenobia. This I know to be a fact. (...) I have been assured that Suky is but a vulgar corruption of Psyche, which is good Greek, and means “the soul” (that’s me, I’m all soul) and sometimes “a butterfly,” which latter meaning undoubtedly alludes to my appearance in my new crimson satin dress...<sup>132</sup>

Poe makes use of dramatic irony in creating an ignorant, laughable character as his protagonist rather than telling us the story in person as the satirist. Psyche is an early feminist overachiever who wants to outshine all others and excel in a male-dominated milieu of literature, yet there is hardly a more unsuited person to the task. In her, the author lashes out against bad, easily achieved, imitative manner of writing, as distant from all sobriety and reason as possible. Psyche Zenobia, with her attention to dress, dubious self-cultivation and an overwhelming tendency to volubility represents all that Poe found ridiculous in a female and a writer. His impersonation of Suky Snobbs and, for that matter, Mr Blackwood, works on the basis of over-the-roof parody. Psyche’s gigantic ego gives her a delightful tendency not to spot irony targeted against herself, and the only voice of reason we hear in “How to Write a Blackwood Article” is that of Doctor Moneypenny, in whom we have no difficulty to recognize a voice that could well be Poe’s own.

In “How to Write a Blackwood Article”, being, after all, a mock-theorizing piece of work, satire leveled at misplaced erudition is the most obvious source of comicality. Poe gives us a pitch-black image of the post-colonial literary America as a land where the popular

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<sup>131</sup> Booth 156.

<sup>132</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (Carlson 70).

culture is imported and thoughtlessly imitated, where a blunt nib is never mended,<sup>133</sup> and where cultural icons are butchered for the sake of easy pleasure. Suky, or as she prefers to call herself, Signora Psyche Zenobia, has just as much in common with Greek as P.R.E.T.T.Y.B.L.U.E.B.A.T.C.H. with civilizing humanity and, for that matter, much less than Tabitha.<sup>134</sup> Poe delights in playing with words and their meanings and derides the misplaced appropriation of classical culture when lowly characters or even animals are given Classical names, such as the Negro Pompey and the dog Diana. By all accounts, Poe was very insistent on researching his material before using it,<sup>135</sup> and this is therefore a natural matter to poke fun at. The Blackwood magazine is seen as a grotesque assimilation of heterogeneous newspaper styles, where the only criterion of choice is heedless insertion. Poe must have thought very lowly of Blackwood indeed if he has Suky suppose even she can do better. She complains that “there was no investigation of any thing at all”<sup>136</sup> in the ladies’ club she joined, and what Poe alludes to here is the lack of any higher thinking in societies whose aim was, after all, “to civilize”.

As a notorious upholder of a tightly bound plot technique and, by all evidence, a conscientious observer of tone and incident, Poe obviously uses the very opposite in parody. “How to Write a Blackwood Article” and “A Predicament” are packed with various kinds of digression, and we cannot read Suky Snobbs’s narration without being constantly reminded of what it should be and is not. Mr Blackwood himself emerges as a ridiculously respectful connoisseur who has all the right perceptions and all the wrong standards. In his enumeration of tones, Poe achieves us a superb parody of unfit writing styles (though Blackwood obviously recommends them), where philosophers are used only for the sake of appropriating false erudition, and where he satirizes the transcendentalist writings, which he considered unintelligible, diffusive and wasteful. However unjust Poe may have been there, we cannot help but smile at his line of attack, especially when we hear that a particularly favorite article has been composed by none other than Blackwood’s own “pet baboon”.<sup>137</sup> What runs against Poe’s own most treasured maxims is when he has Mr Blackwood describe the invention of plot as a mere “filling up” where erudition “is not to be supposed” in a writer.<sup>138</sup> He ends with

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<sup>133</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (Carlson 72).

<sup>134</sup> gazelle from Greek (Dictionary.com, 20th November 2010 <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tabitha>>.)

<sup>135</sup> Stephen Rachman, “Es Lässt Sich Nicht Schreiben”, *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim, Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 50.

<sup>136</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (Carlson 71).

<sup>137</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (Carlson 73).

<sup>138</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (Carlson 75).

an ill-assorted collection of heterogeneous quotations, all of which come to purpose later in “A Predicament”, and all of which are supposed to effectually shut up an insistent critic.

To get a taste of just what Poe parodies, let us quote an extract from Blackwood’s “An Involuntary Experimentalist”, where a man falls inadvertently into a heating pit in a distillery fire and, truthful to the principle that personal experiences are more lively than anything else, he proceeds to keep a journal of the happenings, not failing to observe the precise temperatures on his thermometer. Reason and science (which are Poe’s own traits) are here employed to convincingly narrate a horrific accident but fail abysmally:

I am Doctor \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ St. If any one finds this, come to the copper in the new building, where I am burning to death for want of a ladder.

(...) 228°. The soles of my feet are blistering. One spot of the copper is quite red-hot. My vital[s] are turning to sweat. Gracious God, how long is this to last! I must shrivel soon now. God grant that I may die before the hot metal touches me! Oh my dearest \_\_\_\_\_!

(...) [Good God, what have I done?] (erased). Have mercy on my soul for Christ's sake - O God, have mercy on my soul! I die, forgiving all my en[emies].<sup>139</sup>

If we were to place the last page or so of “A Predicament” next to this excerpt, we would see that exaggerated as Poe’s satire seems, perhaps it does not, after all, hit so far off the mark. John Galt’s “The Buried Alive,”<sup>140</sup> which Poe also mentions in “How to Write a Blackwood Article”, follows in a similar vein (although it has less of a claim to science), this time recording the minute feelings of a gentleman buried prematurely. Here, one of the principal sensations is the realization of just how undignified the position of a dead body is with respect of what is done to it, when one is aware of everything that takes place. William Maginn’s “The Man in the Bell”,<sup>141</sup> on the other hand, deals with a bell-ringer who remains lying under a bell when it is being sounded for twenty minutes by accident and momentarily goes insane, though, of course, he later recovers his senses enough to give us an exact

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<sup>139</sup> Samuel Ferguson, “The Involuntary Experimentalist”, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, October 1837, pp. 487-492, angelfire, 13 November <<http://www.angelfire.com/me2/artgirl/experimentalist.html>>.

<sup>140</sup> John Galt, “The Buried Alive”, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, Volume X, August-December 1821, pp. 262-264, google books, 13 November 2011 <[http://books.google.com/books?id=5iIEeCp\\_og8C&pg=PA262&output=html](http://books.google.com/books?id=5iIEeCp_og8C&pg=PA262&output=html)>.

<sup>141</sup> William Maginn, “The Man in the Bell”, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, Volume X, August-December 1821, pp. 372-375, google books, 13 November 2011 <[http://books.google.com/books?id=5iIEeCp\\_og8C&pg=PA373&output=html](http://books.google.com/books?id=5iIEeCp_og8C&pg=PA373&output=html)>.

narrative. It is needless to say that as modern readers, we share with Poe the view that such accounts would convince us of nothing better than that the reportedly undead or crazy have actually no idea of what it would feel like to really experience it. What could confuse us, on the other hand, is that the subject of being buried alive is taken up by Poe himself in his “Premature Burial,” and “An Involuntary Experimentalist” could easily remind us of “The Pit and the Pendulum”. Indeed, there is no great difference in style. Where do Poe’s crusades against plagiarism<sup>142</sup> come in? What are we to think of Poe if he does not scruple to “borrow” from others for his serious tales and later parodies them when he gets the chance? Answers to this question are multiple and invite us to form our own hypothesis.

To conclude our analysis of “How to Write a Blackwood Article”, let us agree that the narrative scheme of Poe’s satire lies in pretended seriousness bound up with dramatic irony. He makes an implicit pact with the reader against his characters and says in a serious tone much that is meant in the opposite sense. We cannot, however, in all conscience ignore the stumbling block of Poe’s erudition. How many readers of today would have heard of “Brandreth’s pills,”<sup>143</sup> a quack’s hoax supposed to boost imagination, or the contemporary vogue of inserting learned phrases of Greek or German philosophical authorities without any real basis for it? The very motto of the article, “In the name of the Prophet—figs!!”<sup>144</sup> alludes to a humorous sketch of an English contemporary writer, and the word fig is supposed to point to the Greek word for “sycophant,”<sup>145</sup> thereby showing us what Poe thought of unsolicited usage of Greek expressions. However, how many of us would decode this without recourse to other sources? For that matter, how many of Poe’s contemporary readers did? Whatever else can be said about it, Poe’s parody in “How to Write a Blackwood Article” is intelligent yet not so unreachable that it would prevent enjoyment without the reader’s desire to look up unclear terms. After all, Poe does not write for himself and however double-edged a satire on the stupidity of writer and reader is, we have to be able to laugh with him in the end.

We now come at last to Psyche’s own story, of which “How to Write a Blackwood Article” is the necessary backbone. In this tale, Poe gives us a concrete example of bad literature where incident, tone and congruity are all thrown to the winds. As has been noted

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<sup>142</sup> Stephen Rachman, “Es Lässt Sich Nicht Schreiben”, *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim, Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 50.

<sup>143</sup> “Brandreth’s Pills the Real Power of Imagination”, *Inconsiderate.ca*, 20 November 2010 <<http://www.inconsiderate.ca/People/Brandreths-Pills-The-Real-Power.html>>.

<sup>144</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (Carlson 70).

<sup>145</sup> Burton R. Pollin, “Figs, Bells, Poe, and Horace Smith,” from *Poe Newsletter*, June 1970, vol. III, no. 1, 3:8-10, The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, 5 July 2009, 20 November 2010 <<http://www.eapoe.org/pstudies/ps1960/p1970105.htm>>.

above, Psyche Zenobia as a narrator is not to be trusted. We cannot fit her into the role of a satirist, and so she is either a very bad writer, imagining herself as a protagonist of a Blackwood story, or she is a writer and experiencer at the same time, producing an absurdity worthy of satire when she dies in the conclusion of her own story. Obviously, the only “logical” solution is the first one, but who would not be tempted to opt rather for the absurd parody the nonsensical second solution offers us? The shocking disclosures of sensational literature are mocked here once again, since the reader naturally expects the narrator to tell him the truth while Poe gives us nothing but nonsense. While the narrators of “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” put down their memoirs when awaiting execution in prison, Psyche seems to narrate her particular story to us from beyond the grave.

What transpires from the tale at first glance is that it is much too long for the sum of incident. Once again, Poe mocks verbosity, especially extended scenic descriptions of which we get a taste already in the first paragraph:

The confusion and bustle in the streets were terrible. Men were talking. Women were screaming. Children were choking. Pigs were whistling. Carts they rattled. Bulls they bellowed. Cows they lowed. Horses they neighed. Cats they caterwauled. Dogs they danced. Danced! Could it then be possible? Danced! Alas, thought I, my dancing days are over!<sup>146</sup>

Apart from being completely nonsensical, as well as trivial and repetitive (bringing us back to what we have already said about grotesque mechanism), these observations are also joined at the end with an incongruous ejaculation about dancing. Poe very obviously aims at a grotesque atmosphere, sometimes using an alliterative play with language to add to the comical effect of the passage (abundantly present in “The Man That Was Used Up”, as in the case where the narrator decides to be “plain, positive, peremptory—as short as pie-crust”).<sup>147</sup> Once more, we get the never-ending train of adjectives, this time exaggerated to an absurd degree. Within the first paragraph, there are those such as “everlasting and eternal”, “continual” and continued”, “continued and continuous,” “bitter, harassing, disturbing”, “very disturbing”, “serene, and godlike, and heavenly, and exalted, and elevated, and purifying”, “the most enviable, the most truly enviable”, “the most benignly beautiful, the

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<sup>146</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “A Predicament” (Carlson 78-79).

<sup>147</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man That Was Used Up”, *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*, August 1839, pp. 66, The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, Inc., 16 September 2011, 24 November 2011 <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/mnusda.htm>>.

most deliciously ethereal” and “the most pretty,”<sup>148</sup> all of which are, of course, emotionally-charged or superlative. Even the adjectives not applied in succession are highly emotional- to mention just a few, there is “exquisite”, “admirable”, “venerable”, “immense”, “ominous”, “mysterious and inexplicable”, “inevitable”, “magnificent”, “gigantic”, “immense,”<sup>149</sup> and the like. Yet again, Poe produces pathos where none is due. As for the verbs, we encounter expressions like “I was habited”, “I thus formed”, “there presented itself to view”, “the staircase had been surmounted”, “I shall forbear to dilate”, “I will confine myself”, “I made an endeavor”, “hearken,”<sup>150</sup> etc. They are undoubtedly there to make manifest Psyche’s ill-founded learning and her conscientious effort to glorify a meager literary output. If Poe is charged with using quaint verbs and emotional adjectives very often, he shows us what happens if things get overdone.

As in “How to Write a Blackwood Article”, the narration is riddled with a huge amount of inconsequential interruptions and ejaculations. The scene of the beheading, which lasts for a considerable amount of time, is a perfect example of that and offers us another character of Poe’s that just refuses to die.<sup>151</sup> Poe even increases the pathos when he complements the story by two grotesque characters, one of which is the ridiculous one-eyed poodle Diana and the other the buffoon-like Negro Pompey, with “no neck”, and “ankles in the middle of the upper portion of the feet,”<sup>152</sup> evoking both repulsion and humor on the part of the reader. Indeed, Pompey’s presence in this story becomes an issue since Poe very obviously raises some eyebrows when he describes an Afro-American in stereotypical racist terms. His mouth is large, as are his ears and eyes, he has no neck, and his teeth are “like pearl”.<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, he is clad in a second-hand garment, which he, tellingly, lifts up out of harm’s way.<sup>154</sup> His hair is described as “wool” and, throughout the story, he is placed in exactly the same position as the unfortunate poodle, that of an overlookable, and frequently overlooked, subservient entity. He is indeed little better than a slave and Suky treats him with superficial aloofness, especially when she asks him to lift her up on his shoulders so that she can look out from an aperture and disregards all his complaints about the discomfiture of the

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<sup>148</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “A Predicament” (Carlson 79).

<sup>149</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “A Predicament” (Carlson 79-80).

<sup>150</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “A Predicament” (Carlson 80-86).

<sup>151</sup> Jonathan Elmer, “Terminate or Liquidate?”, *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim, Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 109.

<sup>152</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “A Predicament” (Carlson 79).

<sup>153</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “A Predicament” (Carlson 79).

<sup>154</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “A Predicament” (Carlson 79).

situation. Joan Dayan points out that Poe had no particular qualms about the slave situation,<sup>155</sup> but it is perhaps best to see Pompey rather as an unconsciously racist grotesque, an additional comic character rather than an abused victim. Poe's overt suggestions of a possible bond between Suky and Pompey are to be viewed in the same light. "I thought of Pompey- alas, I thought of love!"<sup>156</sup> would be, at the time, an outrageous suggestion to the majority of the readers, only acceptable in a grotesque. On the other hand, Pompey does manage to get his revenge when he refuses to aid Suky when she is threatened by the murderous clock hand. Whether to see this as an argument for a victorious slave over the overbearing master is an uncertain matter and would perhaps mean stretching the significance of the story a bit too much.

The narrative moves ahead at a morbid pace, with frequent pathetic questions, such as "What madness now possessed me? Why did I rush upon my fate?" or "Where then was my guardian angel?"<sup>157</sup> As we have already established, the basis of the grotesque comedy is constant mechanical repetition, and indeed, the whole of "A Predicament" teems with it. It takes as much as three "I entered" to get inside the church, and when the party are ascending the, as it seems, interminable staircase, the word "step" is mentioned as much as seven times. The church staircase goes "round and up, and round and up and round and up,"<sup>158</sup> and we are told that "there were three persons in our party, and two of them have already been the subject of remark. There was a third—that person was myself. (...) I thus formed the third of the party. There was the poodle. There was Pompey. There was myself. We were three."<sup>159</sup> As for the plot itself, it is needless to point out again its absurdity, such as in the inane quarrel with Pompey or the staring out of an aperture for so long that Psyche faces a gruesome execution. Poe gets mechanical and Psyche expertly describes to us the inexorable clock hands, "the longest of which could not have been less than ten feet in length, and, (...) the broadest, eight or nine inches in breadth," adding that "they were of solid steel apparently, and their edges appeared to be sharp."<sup>160</sup> The threat is therefore by no means unavoidable but it is perversely disregarded as Psyche "soon became[s] absorbed in contemplation."<sup>161</sup> The clock's scimitar goes "down, down, down", making the space for Psyche's head "narrower and narrower"<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Joan Dayan, "Amorous Bondage", *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim, Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 196.

<sup>156</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "A Predicament" (Carlson 81).

<sup>157</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "A Predicament" (Carlson 80).

<sup>158</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "A Predicament" (Carlson 80).

<sup>159</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "A Predicament" (Carlson 80). \*italics mine

<sup>160</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "A Predicament" (Carlson 82).

<sup>161</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "A Predicament" (Carlson 82).

<sup>162</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "A Predicament" (Carlson 83).

and Poe gives us a hilarious version of the never ending last moments. There is absolutely no reason for Psyche to feel “entire happiness”<sup>163</sup> at the hour of her death, and yet she does because, as is made manifest throughout the whole tale, Suky has no idea at all of how to successfully write a Blackwood article. The complacent air she adopts at the end is all she can pull off. We even get to know the surgically precise time of death (though by its manner it is perhaps not so surprising) and exactly what happens after, with the ludicrous metaphysical debate over whether “I, the head, was the real Signora Psyche Zenobia—”, or “the body”<sup>164</sup> is. (Grotesque physical fragmentation is again a theme shared with “The Man That Was Used Up”.) The whole is complemented by ridiculously distorted quotations provided by Blackwood, most of which, for some reason, end with a “-y”. Not only do they tie in with the narrative at best very loosely, but also the fact that Psyche reproduces them without a second thought as to how they should be spelled suggests a complete lack of interest in correctness. Once again, Poe mocks ignorance and the pretensions to learning where none are substantiated, and we cannot express some relief at finding Suky “dogless, niggerless, and headless”<sup>165</sup> finally successfully dead.

In these two tales, we are confronted with a lot that is similar to what Poe uses in his “serious” horror tales, but here, these elements are used for purely comic purposes. If the moment of horror is prolonged as much as it is here, it does not matter what expressions are used; the fear necessarily goes to waste. The need for a tight plot and a frugality of expression are brilliantly exemplified and Poe shows us that well managed, horror tales are successful. Badly done, they turn horror into laughter. The line between genuine horror and parody seems to be dangerously thin. If we conclude, however, by saying that Poe well manages both, why is it that his comic pieces are so often overlooked? John Bryant propounds one possible answer. He says that “nowhere in Poe do we find the good-natured, integrative, redemptive, or transcendent urgings of amiable humor.”<sup>166</sup> That is true, since Poe’s humor is primarily used to satirize, to attack, not to mock forgivingly. Perhaps that is the reason why many of us would be tempted to say that Poe is not, and cannot, be humorous. John Bryant goes on to suggest that the reason for Poe’s biting burlesque was his feeling oppressed by the “American

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<sup>163</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “A Predicament” (Carlson 85).

<sup>164</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “A Predicament” (Carlson 85).

<sup>165</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “A Predicament” (Carlson 86).

<sup>166</sup> John Bryant, “Poe’s Ape of UnReason: Humor, Ritual, and Culture”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Jun., 1996), pp. 16-52, jstor, 13 November 2011

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/2933839.pdf?acceptTC=true>> 16.

mob”, and as it attacks its readers for ignorance, it is inevitably “self-destructive”.<sup>167</sup> ‘What will become of us if we are not wiser than this?’ Poe seems to ask us, and the underlying menace and desperate straining for humor where only bitter satire is effected make him desperately un-humorous to some readers.

“How to Write a Blackwood Article” and “A Predicament” are tales where Poe’s judgment as an author is most visibly present since the unspoken agreement with the reader that these tales are satires produces also an agreement about how they should be read. In other words, to decode the meaning of the tale we must not concentrate on what Psyche says, but on what Poe is saying behind her back. As a narrator, however, Suky is a delight. She is snobbish, ignorant, verbose and small-minded. She is, in a word, everything that Poe hated. She makes a travesty of all that we would consider worth reading and it is certain that with her last “I have done,” many readers must have heaved a sigh of relief. She is indeed an abomination, but what could be more effective in the domain of the parody? She succeeds in making us laugh at her folly at the same time as she fails in accomplishing her design to “write a (good) Blackwood article”. The majority of us read on in spite of her tiresome blabber if only to find out how such a burlesque could possibly end, and where she fails is where Poe succeeds. It does not matter whether we see her tale as a paradoxical “beyond-the-grave” narrative or simply a first-person story with her as the main character. She provides us with a picture of what Poe stands against in the domain of the short story and perhaps also with a radiant case of self-mockery. As such, she proves Poe to be an unusually versatile writer, full of contradictions and teeming with invention. Whether we see him as humorous or not, his satiric parodies, viewed in conjunction with his horror stories, provide a more complex view into Poe’s literary output.

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<sup>167</sup> John Bryant, “Poe’s Ape of UnReason: Humor, Ritual, and Culture”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Jun., 1996), pp. 16-52, jstor, 13 November 2011  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/2933839.pdf?acceptTC=true>> 19.

## 6. Conclusion

There is nothing random in Poe's selection of narrators. The haunted trespassers belong very clearly to the horror story domain, the tales where an outside judgment is needed are observed from an outside perspective (the narrator being detached to a varying degree), and the grotesques merit a ridiculous viewpoint of their own where Poe as the author makes an unspoken agreement with us against his narrator. In distinguishing these points we have made use of Franz Stanzel's typological circle<sup>168</sup> and established the narrators in the second and the last chapter as first person narrators. In the case of "The Black Cat" and the "Tell-Tale Heart", there is an oscillation between the reasoned and the unreasoned tone of the experiencing and the narrating persona, the narrator usually distancing himself to a degree from what he committed in temporary madness. This distinction is playfully employed in "A Predicament" where it even potentially complicates the ending, since the reader cannot be sure if the narrator tells her story from beyond the grave or merely fabricates her evidence. In contrast, the tales discussed in the third chapter are samples of what Stanzel calls "authorial narrative situation",<sup>169</sup> employing narrators whose existential plane is not shared with the events of story they tell and enabling them a distance from their characters. A list of these distances is to be found in Booth's *A Rhetoric of Fiction*,<sup>170</sup> and they have helped us determine what effect Poe intended to have on the reader. Poe distances the narrator from all possible identification with us by making him a killer or a fool or by directly assuming the role of a persona who judges his characters from an intellectual/moral distance. Furthermore, Booth's category of an unreliable narrator<sup>171</sup> helped us define the narrators of "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart". A significant space has been accorded to an assessment of Poe's theoretical prescriptions and goals in tale writing while other sources have helped us determine categories such as the grotesque and the uncanny.<sup>172</sup>

In all the stories discussed, a single effect is pursued and (with the obvious exceptions of "A Predicament" and "How to Write a Blackwood Article") unity of plot rigidly observed.

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<sup>168</sup> Stanzel 280.

<sup>169</sup> Stanzel 280.

<sup>170</sup> Booth 125, 155-159.

<sup>171</sup> Booth 158.

<sup>172</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Gloucester, Mass.: Indiana University Press, 1986); Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (Part 1+2), Eastern Michigan University, 13 November 2011 <<http://people.emich.edu/acoykenda/uncanny1.htm>>.

Poe's horror stories are what he is best known for, and the question therefore seems to be not whether Poe was sincere in what he published, but what he did to excel in that which he employed himself at. His call for unity and effect is what connects him to the development of the modern short story form and we can justly propound that while there is much in him that is romantically fantastic, there is always an underlying tendency to sobriety and a conscious fabrication that establishes him as a man of reason. Unsurprisingly, this at first sight illogical blend of styles makes him into a writer who has a lot to say to a modern reader. Such a reader often requires the fantasy and juiciness of Gothicism together with the underlying tendency to skepticism, all of which enable him to be both thrilled with, and ticked by, Poe's stories. In an age when American literary production was yet in diapers and Europe continued to provide motherly inspiration, Poe raised a demand for a native production that could compete with the best Europe had to offer.

Poe's unreliable narrators lose their identity and spend the narrative unsuccessfully trying to retrieve it, becoming divided between the rational and the insane personality and vainly battling with whatever their consciousness makes them believe. When we establish to what extent Poe occupied himself with a studied creation of effect and consider how meticulously he contrasted a "sane" and a "mad" narrative, it is astonishing indeed that critics have considered him mad. One look at Poe's satire would swiftly cure them of that malady and convince them rather that Poe could feel himself into a disintegrating personality, if only because his own life had been riddled with misfortune. He could present us with a believable picture of such a persona either for our thrill or for deeper contemplation. Poe was shrewd enough to recognize that mere horrors of circumstance would not do and opted instead for the horrors within. At the same time, he wrote with the premise that reality is merely a matter of perception and that there is a thin line between sanity and delusion. It is not real peril that haunts Poe's narrators and most of his characters but their consciousness of incompatibility with the ordinary world, of some defect in their personality that ultimately can have no other outcome than their destruction, ironically often brought about by themselves. Their world is a world of extreme emotions, of hurried diction, of intellect turning into madness, a world where identity and the possibilities of human consciousness are questioned. The unreliable narrators are, throughout the story, intellectually divided from the rest of the world and from any other evaluating persona, which makes them struggle against the odds much as Poe himself struggled against the setbacks of his life; alone and unaided. As James W. Gargano says, "Even the most cursory reader must be struck by the fact that the narrator is most

“possessed and maddened” when he most proudly boasts of his self-control.”<sup>173</sup> That premise raises a question whether reason cannot be the mask of madness and whether the two cannot exist side by side. On this question, Poe conscientiously baffles the narrator, therefore baffling the reader and the critic as well.

It is interesting to note that a surprising number of Poe’s narrators consciously reflect on their telling processes rather than just directly presenting a scene. The result of this is that we are always warned about the subjectivity of the narrator and learn to expect his untrustworthiness. As such, we immediately perceive that the narrator of “Metzengerstein” is aloof and cultured and looks down upon the superstitious people of Hungary. The ironic and emotionally involved narrator of “Hop-Frog” derides the practices of an ignorant and autocratic king and the almost absent, and certainly very much detached, narrator of “The Masque of the Black Death” suggests only by the presence of evaluating adjectives his condemnation of Prince Prospero and his court. In the last chapter, the obtuse, verbose and self-conscious narrator of “How to Write a Blackwood Article” and “A Predicament” invests Poe with an ironic distance and a possibly subversive outlook on the horror story. Indeed, as regards Poe’s satire, we cannot help agreeing with Booth in saying that “most of us have, I suspect, encountered novelists who people their novels with very short heroes because they themselves want to appear tall.”<sup>174</sup> By poking fun at an indiscriminating Blackwood magazine editor and a foolish new writer, Poe is in fact saying: “This is not how it is supposed to be done.” As there is no way of deciding whether Poe also meant to say “In my own tales I prove the opposite” or if a certain amount of self-deprecation was intended, Poe’s own stance to horror can be disputed. His wide choice of narrators (and we get others in Poe’s other stories) reflects to what extent Poe was conscious of the primary role of a mediator between himself as the writer and the audience.

To be dramatic is one of the goals of any narrative centered on raising emotions, and it certainly is Poe’s. To realize how he does that, we have also attempted a more concise analysis of the specific elements of Poe’s style, specifically stressing the centrality of the emotional adjective, repetition and gradation, and his use of unusual verbs and intensifiers. They provided us with a deeper insight into Poe’s creation of tension, vividness or just peculiarity and enriched our study of his techniques. We have learned that his emotionally-charged or modified adjectives and frequent repetitions constitute a language of extreme

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<sup>173</sup> James W. Gargano, “The Question of Poe’s Narrators”, *College English*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Dec., 1963), pp. 177-181, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/373684.pdf>> 181.

<sup>174</sup> Booth 85.

perturbation, while the paucity of emotion when an act of horror is described by the reflecting narrator intensify the effect of horror and revulsion. The verbosity of Psyche Zenobia and especially the suspect and damnable prescriptions of her literary patron showed us the other side of the coin and as such proved indispensable for a more concise judgment on Poe's own writing techniques.

What now reminds to be questioned is the response Poe's pains have gained him. "In his own time and in his own country (...) the genius of Edgar Allan Poe was not recognized,"<sup>175</sup> David Sinclair writes. T. S. Eliot suggests that "Poe's influence is...puzzling. In France the influence of his poetry and of his poetic theories has become immense. In England and America it seems almost negligible."<sup>176</sup> On the other hand, George Bernard Shaw, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Dickens in England<sup>177</sup> and thanks to Charles Baudelaire also the French symbolists, have praised him highly. Of the notable literati of Poe's time, there is Washington Irving who also seems to have praised Poe,<sup>178</sup> together with James Russell Lowell<sup>179</sup> and Nathaniel Hawthorne.<sup>180</sup> On the other hand, it was Rufus Griswold<sup>181</sup> who blackened Poe's name for many successive generations and who is one of the first in the huge number of critics who have persistently identified Poe with his narrators. Only from the articles used here, we can mention Napier Wilt who is the advocate of Poe's self-reflection in his tales,<sup>182</sup> and James W. Gargano who holds the very opposite view.<sup>183</sup> From the modernists onward, there is D.H. Lawrence,<sup>184</sup> who praised Poe's "Ligeia", or Allen Tate, who reviewed Poe favorably, placing him within the background of Southern

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<sup>175</sup> Sinclair 12.

<sup>176</sup> Joseph N. Riddel, "The "Crypt" of Edgar Poe", *boundary 2*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Revisions of the Anglo-American Tradition: Part 2 (Spring, 1979), pp. 117-144, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/303167.pdf?acceptTC=true>> 118.

<sup>177</sup> Sinclair 12.

<sup>178</sup> Killis Campbell, "Contemporary Opinion of Poe", *PMLA*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Jun., 1921), pp. 142-166, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/457317.pdf>> 156.

<sup>179</sup> Killis Campbell, "Contemporary Opinion of Poe", *PMLA*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Jun., 1921), pp. 142-166, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/457317.pdf>> 148.

<sup>180</sup> Killis Campbell, "Contemporary Opinion of Poe", *PMLA*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Jun., 1921), pp. 142-166, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/457317.pdf>> 158.

<sup>181</sup> Hammond 25.

<sup>182</sup> Napier Wilt, "Poe's Attitude toward His Tales: A New Document", *Modern Philology*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Aug., 1927), pp. 101-105, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/433406.pdf?acceptTC=true>> <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/433406.pdf>> 101.

<sup>183</sup> James W. Gargano, "The Question of Poe's Narrators", *College English*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Dec., 1963), pp. 177-181, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/373684.pdf>> 177.

<sup>184</sup> James W. Gargano, "Ligeia": Dream and Destruction", *College English*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (Feb., 1962), pp. 337-342, jstor, 13 November 2011 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/373801.pdf>> 337.

literature.<sup>185</sup> On the other hand, Wayne C. Booth does not think highly of Poe at all. The question then seems to be not of a temporal but of a personal response, complicated mainly by the fact that Poe's own stance toward his stories is uncertain. We have already said that his ambition was to be a poet and he certainly shows great merit in the field of theory, but it is undeniable that his stories are aimed at the common reader. The question is whether this impairs his standing with the contemporary critic and reader, and what it is exactly that constitutes Poe's continuing appeal.

Indeed, the question of Poe's popularity is an intriguing theme, one that Mark Neimeyer discusses in "Poe and Popular Culture".<sup>186</sup> He gives persuasive arguments about why Poe has become "an icon of "literature" (among other things)".<sup>187</sup> It was possible precisely because Poe currently represents much that does not necessarily have a direct connection with him at all and, as Neimeyer suggests, it is questionable whether those buying the plethora of Poe's merchandize even realize what Poe is all about. Poe seems to oscillate between "highbrow and lowbrow culture,"<sup>188</sup> fascinating generation after generation because of the persistent mythologizing<sup>189</sup> of his identity. Neimeyer argues that part of Poe's fame comes from the fact that he is perceived by many who have not necessarily read his books as an established literary icon, and is therefore identified with the received canon (a fact definitely boosting his reputation). He is furthermore seen as approachable (often first encountered in childhood), and is therefore often picked up by many in preference of, let us say, *Moby-Dick*. Considering the vogue of the Gothic in the modern era, that Poe's popularity is on the rise is understandable. His association with it, however, is precisely why many readers or critics avoid him as dismissible. As Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman point out, Poe "generates antitheses"<sup>190</sup> and his standing in the American context and even outside of it is indeterminable. It is time (and many critics have perceived it) to accept the antitheses of Poe and realize that he will perhaps always straddle the boundaries of critical and popular culture. As a result, his image will continue to be just as multiple and uncertainly classifiable as his literary output. Whether we discount Poe as a writer or not, we cannot discount him as

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<sup>185</sup> Joseph N. Riddel, "The "Crypt" of Edgar Poe", *boundary 2*, Vol. 7, No. 3, *Revisions of the Anglo-American Tradition: Part 2* (Spring, 1979), pp. 117-144, jstor, 13 November 2011  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/303167.pdf?acceptTC=true>> 121.

<sup>186</sup> Mark Neimeyer, "Poe and Popular Culture", *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 205.

<sup>187</sup> Mark Neimeyer, "Poe and Popular Culture" (Hayes 206).

<sup>188</sup> Mark Neimeyer, "Poe and Popular Culture" (Hayes 208).

<sup>189</sup> Mark Neimeyer, "Poe and Popular Culture" (Hayes 211).

<sup>190</sup> Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman, "Beyond "The Problem of Poe"", *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim, Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) x.

an important and dedicated analyst of style in fiction and as a writer deeply concerned with themes such as personality, authority, perception and reader-response. As such, he is rewarding to be read and written about in the modern era and without a doubt in the centuries to come.

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