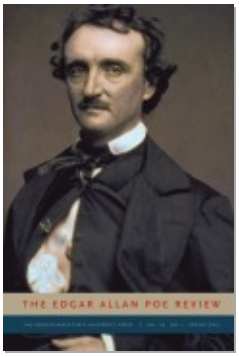
Lovely Apparitions and Spiritualized Corpses: Consumption, Medical Discourse, and Edgar Allan Poe's Female Vampire



Aspasia Stephanou

The Edgar Allan Poe Review, Volume 14, Number 1, Spring 2013, pp. 36-54 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

Lovely Apparitions and Spiritualized Corpses

Consumption, Medical Discourse, and Edgar Allan Poe's Female Vampire

Aspasia Stephanou, University of Stirling

Abstract

This essay examines the associations of consumption with the disease of tuberculosis and vampirism, as well as the ways nineteenth-century medical discourse and vampire narratives facilitated the creation of a pathologized female body. Early nineteenth-century medical discourse and literature on consumption exalted the materiality of the consuming female body by transforming suffering into something beautiful, pure and spiritual, or even sexual. Poe's consuming brides, however, embodied the horrifying reality of the decomposing body that remains alive. In particular, Poe's "Ligeia" (1838) is an eloquent example of this tension between idealism and materiality. By reading Poe's vampire tales through the context of antebellum metaphysics and discourses on consumption, I argue that his unique treatment of female vampires simultaneously responds to, and deviates from, these topics. Influenced by Schelling's philosophy, Poe's vampire tales are shuddering examples of woman's materialized spirit. Following his own thread of gothic materialism, and moving away from American Transcendentalists, Poe offers ghastly visions of an absolutism that is at once distinctly feminine and horrific.

While consumption in the critical debate over "vampirism" is seen primarily in the context of contemporary capitalist culture's acquisition of material goods, historically the term is associated with the wasting and eating up of the body as a result of loss of humors and the disease that, in the first half of the nineteenth century, came to be known as tuberculosis. As Bram Dijkstra suggests in *Idols of Perversity*, the two meanings of consumption are by no

THE EDGAR ALLAN POE REVIEW, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2013

means completely distinct. "Woman," he writes, "having been consumed in the marriage market, then having become consumptive as a wife through lack of respect, exercise, and freedom, took her revenge by becoming a voracious consumer."[1] Indeed, Susan Sontag points out that tuberculosis is described in images that capture the dark, irrational side of nineteenth-century *homo economicus*: "consumption; wasting; squandering of vitality."[2] However, here I want to turn away from the vampire consumer and examine the vampire consumptive. The relation between vampirism and consumption as tuberculosis is treated in D. H. Lawrence's 1923 essay "Edgar Allan Poe" in *Studies in Classic American Literature*. In this early account of "Ligeia" (1838), vampires, and tuberculosis, Lawrence focuses on love as a "ghastly disease."[3] He describes Poe's stories, particularly, "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), as "love" stories because love, "intense vibrations" and the "prismatic ecstasy of heightened consciousness," "is the prime cause of tuberculosis."[4] As "the mysterious vital attraction which draws things together" toward "unison in consciousness," "utter merging," and the transgression of limits, love is a "ghastly disease."[5] This desiring consciousness that hungrily craves for more knowledge is vampiric, since "to try to *know* any living being is to try to suck the life out of that being.[6] According to Lawrence, "Ligeia" is the chief example of such an obscene love pushed to its limits, and where both the "vampire" lovers' will and stern passion to know each other leads to death.[7]

More recently, Faye Ringel in *New England's Gothic Literature* shows that between 1790 and 1890 the disease of consumption in New England was related to the belief in vampirism. The New England vampires were often imagined as young sexual female "victims turned victimizers," "draining the vitality" of the community or "fading away and dying."[8] Unlike European traditions of blood-sucking revenants, vampirism in New England is bloodless and, like consumption, imagined by some as "a spiritual disease, obsession, or visitation."[9] The proliferation of vampire superstitions in the area coincides with New England's degeneration and rural decay.[10] Vampirism then became a fitting metaphor for the disintegration of the tubercular female body and of the body of New England.

I will begin to investigate the associations of consumption with the disease of tuberculosis and vampirism, as well as the ways nineteenth-century medical and literary discourse facilitated the creation of a pathologized female body. The construction of beautiful wasting bodies not only served to mask the materiality of the disintegrating body, as Elisabeth Bronfen argues,[11] but also to control and mark woman as other.

While the death of a beautiful consumptive idealized and consumed by the male gaze is represented through the tension between religious imagery and sexual undertones, in Edgar Allan Poe's stories vampirism is linked to the death of the ideal woman and the threatening materiality of her decaying body. Nineteenth-century medical discourse and literature on consumption exalted the materiality of the consuming female body by transforming suffering into something beautiful, pure and spiritual, or even sexual. Poe's consuming brides, however, embodied the horrifying reality of the decomposing body that remains alive. In the putrefying effects of materiality Poe finds the death of idealism. As J. Gerald Kennedy argues, Poe, "unlike most of his contemporaries, refused to soften or idealize mortality and kept its essential horror in view."[12] Madeline Usher, Berenice, Morella, and Ligeia represent the dark ladies of Romantic passion, with black hair and dark eyes, whose mysterious deaths are bloodless and their bodies emptied of the blood that constitutes their identity. Poe's consuming women are especially unique in the way they all die by unknown consuming diseases.

In particular, Poe's "Ligeia" is an eloquent example of this tension between idealism and materiality. "Ligeia" not only diverts from medical discourse's idealization of woman's materiality but focuses on the very horror of her materiality elevating her from a position of docile benevolence to that of dominant and vigorous malevolence. While it can be argued that Poe reduces woman to an object of a consuming disease and male consumption, I want to read Ligeia's spectral materiality as an image of evil that gives expression to Poe's Dark Romanticism and Schellingian philosophy. The wasting and diseased body of the female becomes analogous to evil and sin and embodies a perversion of the natural order. Ligeia is a woman of evil who is driven by her fierce spirit and wild desire for life beyond the grave. This horrifying and passionate will for life is so irrational and persistent that it materializes into a vampire and a diabolical distortion of life. What Poe calls Ligeia's "gigantic volition"[13] is her own perverted spirit that seeks to dominate and exploit matter in order to accede to a semblance of life: an uncanny doubling of life itself. By reading Poe's vampire tales through the context of antebellum metaphysics and discourses on consumption, I argue that his unique treatment of female vampires simultaneously responds to, and deviates from, these topics. Influenced by Schelling's philosophy, Poe's vampire tales are shuddering examples of woman's materialized spirit. Following his own thread of gothic materialism, and moving away from American Transcendentalists, Poe offers ghastly visions of an absolutism that is at once distinctly feminine and horrific.

In order to grasp Edgar Allan Poe's vampire stories it is necessary to situate them within the specific cultural context of antebellum America. His female vampires should be located not in otherworldly places, but within this precise society from which they arose. More particularly, as Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe* point out, it is Poe's "syncopated relation to American culture, at once both in and out of step, that gives his writing its unique power to clarify the American tradition."[14] This process of identification and differentiation is also fundamental here in understanding the ways Poe's treatment of the tubercular woman and vampirism simultaneously responds to and deviates from its cultural context. Poe's fictional ladies are both allusions to and abstractions from the antebellum world of America and its pro-slavery ideologues who promoted a particular view of delicate and white southern womanhood. As Joan Dayan argues, "Poe's ladies, those dream-dimmed, ethereal living dead of his poems, have been taken as exemplars of what Poe called 'supernal Beauty'—an entitlement that he would degrade again and again."[15] While antebellum ideals of passive and weak womanhood echo Poe's statement in the "Philosophy of Composition" that the "death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world," on the other hand, Poe's vampiric women in such stories as "Ligeia" are very different. Transformed from beautiful women to "very unpoetical"[16] subjects, Poe's women are not compliant wives, but evil witches and vampires.

Ligeia, Berenice, Morella, and Madeline Usher's emaciated bodies display signs of consumption. From as early as 1398, until the end of the nineteenth century, consumption was a word used for pulmonary tuberculosis.[17] Until 1839 the disease was variously known as phthisis, consumption, scrofula, king's evil, hectic fever, and gastric fever. Consumption was used widely to signify any kind of illness that resulted in weight loss and death, and the "catchall term for any and all chronic wasting disease, usually designated emaciation with pulmonary symptoms."[18] Emaciation was not just a passing stage of losing flesh, Katherine Ott notes, but "thanatoid emaciation, deathly thinness, and an ashen skin tone. A weak and wasted physique consumed by disease indicated imminent death."[19] Tuberculosis, on the other hand, referred to a specific "condition in which elastic lung fibers, called tubercles, were coughed up. What people called tuberculosis throughout most of the nineteenth century was not the bacterial condition that came to be called by that name later."[20] Pulmonary tuberculosis, the most usual type of consumption, was understood as an illness of the lungs. Only after the identification of the bacillus by Robert Koch in 1882 did the meaning of tuberculosis change to describe patients that were infected with the bacteria and who produced expectoration.[21]

Early nineteenth-century discussions of consumption emphasized the prevalence of the disease among women and slaves in the South. As Marli F. Weiner shows, what was considered normal in the antebellum South for white male bodies could not be for female or black bodies.[22] Southern physicians developed theories of disease based on sex and race that facilitated ideological purposes. Woman's subservient and controlled role within antebellum southern society was shaped by medical and cultural stereotypes of female consumptives sanctified and made docile by the wasting disease. Lorna Duffin explains how "the image of the woman as an invalid, as weak, delicate and perpetually prone to illness, could not have been maintained without the support of the medical profession,"[23] and Ott adds that "the average physician at work practiced a rich mixture of common sense, folklore, popular knowledge, and medical doctrine."[24] Consumptions, including tuberculosis, existed and disseminated in cultures that produced and invested them with various meanings. The cultural meanings of these wasting diseases informed and determined a discourse that would influence society's perceptions about consumption and identity. The vampire, inhabiting marginal zones of existence, became the ideal figure to represent, and therefore through which to discuss, consumptive illnesses and tuberculosis.

Nineteenth-century medical discourse added to the mythology of tuberculosis and shaped much of the vampire literature associated with the disease. The fact that the disease had afflicted artists such as Shelley, Keats, and Chopin made it more glamorous and romantic; nevertheless, the focus of the literature and medical treatises is on the consumptive woman. Medical treatises of the nineteenth century speculate on the appearance of female consumptive bodies with diaphanous pale skin and rosy cheeks. Medical knowledge and literature created a metaphorical feminine body, a cultural construct controlled by the authority and gaze of the medical practitioner and writer.

Exemplary of this is Samuel Warren's popular *Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician*, which was published anonymously as a series of short stories in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* from August 1830 to August 1837. "Consumption," published in 1830, describes the disease as a vampire drinking the blood of its victims: "Consumption!—Terrible, insatiable tyrant! Who can arrest thy progress, or number thy victims? Why dost thou attack the fairest and loveliest of our species? Why select blooming and beautiful youth, instead of haggard and exhausted age? . . . By what infernal subtilty [*sic*] hast thou contrived hitherto to baffle the profoundest skill of science, to frustrate utterly the uses of experience, and disclose thyself only when thou hast irretrievably secured thy victim, and thy fangs are crimsoned with its blood?—Destroying angel!"[25] Warren was not

a doctor but his sensational stories examining gothic, scandalous, and medical topics were presented as medical papers of a friend detailing his cases as a physician. This use of the genre of medical case history to present his fictional accounts confused the boundaries between medicine and literature, reality and fiction. Indeed, many physicians were deceived by the apparent truthfulness of the medical cases and were infuriated by the use of patients' names and the lack of respect to the code of patient confidentiality. Warren's dramatization of diseases such as consumption was a response to the already sensational cultural horizon and the evocative symbolisms of consumption. The exaggerated language of his popular stories was derided in literary circles. Edgar Allan Poe parodied Blackwood's sensational topics and referred to Warren's "'*The Diary of a Late Physician*,' where the merit lay in good rant, and indifferent Greek—both of them taking things with the public," in "How to Write a Blackwood Article" (1838).[26] At the same time, Margaret Alterton in the *Origins of Poe's Critical Theory* (1925) points out that Warren's story "Thunder Struck" was a possible influence on Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." For example, the theme of the cataleptic trance of a beautiful young lady and her bloody return to life is present in both of the stories.[27]

Medical discourse was not, however, less sensational. Warren's example reveals how frail and indistinct were the boundaries between fiction and fact. This was because nineteenth- and twentieth-century divisions between disciplines had not yet been consolidated in the early nineteenth century. For many physicians, consumption was more of a cultural disease than a reality. Physicians talked about blood and the body in poetic terms, and their figurative language, manifested in the various medical pamphlets and treatises, idealized the sick body.

In particular, a beautiful female body was associated with fairness and delicacy. Professor of Theory and Practice of Medicine in Columbian College of Washington City Thomas Henderson, in writing about different cases of pulmonary consumption in *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* in 1831, idealizes the beautiful fragility of the female patient. In beginning to describe the case of a young lady patient, Henderson substitutes scientific fact with florid metaphor:

> It has been observed that consumption preys not "on the thorns and brambles of this wilderness, but on the rose and passion-flower of human excellence and gentleness." This was exemplified in the case of this lady. Apprehensive from her fragile delicacy of constitution that she would have phthisis, and attracted by her meek gentle disposition, and by her

> personal loveliness, her friends watched over her with a tenderness that sheltered her from every impression which could hazard either emotion of mind, or irritation of body. She was nurtured with all the vigilance and care required by the loveliest and most tender flower.[28]

American physicians talked about the physical signs of consumption and pathologized the delicate beauty of the blonde as consumptive. Professor of the Theory and Practice of Physic in the University of Vermont William Sweetser analyzed the disease in relation to the frailness of the structure and feebleness of vitality. For Sweetser, like for many medical practitioners, the surface of the skin became a map of the inside pathology of the body. Through literary language he created a palette of skin shades, opposing "bright redness" with "soft paleness" and "blooming red" with "sickly whiteness," to color his description of a disease that remained hidden within the darkness of the body:

> It is a matter of common observation, that a tendency to consumption . . . is frequently associated with striking peculiarities of physical constitution. . . . A fair, delicate skin, often of a waxy whiteness and clearness, approaching to semi-transparency, and looking as though it had been blanched. A bright redness of the cheeks . . . contrasts strongly with the soft paleness in its vicinity. . . . Hence there may be observed frequent transitions of color, the countenance now being lighted up with a blooming red, which in a little while fades into a sickly whiteness. Such complexions are generally esteemed handsome, but to the experienced eye, it is a beauty fraught with the mournful associations of its transitory nature.[29]

The nineteenth century's preoccupation with the pale, consumptive body—a result of loss of blood through hemoptysis and in some cases of the physician's experiments with excessive bloodletting—the languid eyes and ephemeral rosy vitality add to the double identity of the victim. Like with the fin-de-siècle's binaries of angel and demon, the consumptive woman is also the embodiment of a fascinating evil that consumes her blood from within, while she develops into a spiritual being, negating the horrors of her flesh. In *A Treatise on Pulmonary Consumption* (1830) John Murray's analysis of the disease exemplifies some of the physicians' interest in poetical language and the Romantic imagination that is captured by the figure of the vampire. He writes that "consumption, like the vampire, while it drinks up the vital stream, fans with its wing the hopes that flutter in the hectic breast; the transparent colours

that flit on the features like those of the rainbow on the cloud, are equally evanescent, and leave its darkness more deeply shaded. They who are the kindliest and the best it selects for its victims, while it softens the temper to an angel tone, as if it would attenuate that delicate materialism to aërial being, in anticipation of the change it is so soon to assume."[30] Here metaphorical language flourishes. The use of simile likens consumption to the vampire sucking life-blood while falsely raising the hopes of the consumptive. Murray here follows the Romantics' ideals of beauty. "For the Romantics," Mario Praz writes, "beauty was enhanced by exactly those qualities which seem to deny it, by those objects which produce horror; the sadder, the most painful it was, the more intensely they relished it."[31] But tuberculosis, like the vampire, is dangerous and alluring. It is beautiful and deadly. Despite the fact that this passage does not indicate the sex of the body, the language seems to suggest that women are the victims of pulmonary consumption. They metamorphose here into angelic and ethereal beings by the wasting of blood, made beautiful by disease and imminent death. The feminine identity of the consumptive was discursively constructed and created a view of woman as weak and inclined to disease. Antebellum culture, like early-nineteenth European cultural productions, by creating ethereal and genteel images of consumptive women, sought to evaporate and occult female presence while, at the same time, retaining woman's status as man's property.

Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) writes that tuberculosis "remained the preferred way of giving death a meaning—an edifying, refined disease. Nineteenth-century literature is stocked with descriptions of almost symptomless, unfrightened, beatific deaths from TB."[32] The emaciated and wasted body was mythologized and portrayed as beautiful and more poignant. Sontag explains that a disease of the lungs meant a disease of the soul.[33] For Sontag, however, such metaphors are demoralizing and damaging for the suffering people. Masking the debilitating effects on the body and the reality of suffering and impending death, consumption and death were destined for the refined. While the body decayed, the spirit flourished. This spiritual exaltation of the female consumptive's suffering was an expression of a Catholic ideology that valued suffering and bodily renunciation. Thus the medieval woman's ascetic practices can be associated with the tubercular's wasting away and a heightened state of spirituality.[34] This Christian mentality and the idea of the original sin was what made woman's suffering and redemption so significant.

Edgar Allan Poe's vampire stories materialize out of this cultural ether of antebellum America. Against the ideological declarations and cultural representations of frail womanhood and female sanctity, Poe offers unique portrayals of evil, erudite female consumptives, and vampires. "Ligeia" unveils the horror

of the reanimating corpse. The narrative presents consumption as the disease of Ligeia's diabolical spirit that leads to the inversion and distortion of the natural order. Death does not announce the end of Ligeia's life but her revivification in an undead horrifying state. On the other hand, Rowena's feeble will and weak resistance to her consuming disease lead to her demise. Her body becomes the medium through which the fanatical spirit of Ligeia will materialize. Her spirit and living force enter Rowena's bodily form through the materiality of blood: "three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid."[35] Blood functions as the symbol of life, the fluid that animates the vampire but also the medium of life itself and the carrier of one's vitality and identity.[36]

The images of consumptive women in medical and literary discourse, their emaciated form, and fairness of complexion, whiteness of teeth, hectic blush, and weakness of the voice[37] are conjured up in the descriptions of Ligeia and Rowena's consuming bodies and diseases. On the one hand, Ligeia's loveliness and exquisite beauty consists in her delicate and "emaciated" form, "lofty and pale forehead," "skin rivalling the purest ivory" and "the quiet ease, of her demeanor, or the incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of her footfall. She came and departed as a shadow."[38] As the consuming disease takes hold of her body, Ligeia's "wild eyes blazed with too—too glorious effulgence; the pale fingers became of the transparent waxen hue of the grave and the blue veins upon the lofty forehead swelled and sank impetuously with the tides of the most gentle emotion."[39] On the other hand, Rowena's symptoms of consumption, her fever, "deadly pallor," the relapses and temporary return of "tinge of color" flushing on the cheeks, cause the narrator "terror" and "anxiety."[40] In the descriptions of Ligeia, Poe plays with clichéd imagery and normative descriptions of consumptive beauties in order to challenge and inject them with a "strangeness" that both delights and appalls. For the narrator, Ligeia's exquisite loveliness is not pure but tainted by the strangeness of her unyielding passion and will. The "*intensity* in thought, action or speech" is an index of this "gigantic volition" and "fierce energy."[41] Indeed, when both women struggle with the shadow of death, this is not idealized. Their deaths are not beautiful or holy, but terrifying.

Vampirism as a state of undeath is staged through consumption's oscillation between life and death: "This hideous drama of revivification was repeated; how each terrific relapse was only into a sterner and apparently irredeemable death; how each agony wore the aspect of a struggle with some invisible foe; and how each struggle was succeeded by I know not what of wild change in the personal appearance of the corpse."[42] The horror of Ligeia's vampirism is experienced first through the terrifying revivifications of Rowena. The two revivifications are followed by a third in which evil is materialized as the

vampire Ligeia. The struggle is that between life and death, a weak and strong will, and evil and good.

Poe's response to the question of womanhood can be read through his treatment of philosophical ideas circulating in antebellum America. In his stories, vampirism and disease are dramatized through the tension between mind and body, masculine and feminine, life and death. There is an urge for metaphysical union that is disrupted by the horror of woman's evil spirit. The horror of Poe's vampire stories arises from this tension between metaphysics and sexual difference, between the desire to synthesize dualisms into an absolute identity and their disruption by the fleshy materiality of monstrous femininity and her dangerous persistence to transcend God's will. This tension between idealism and materiality has been historically analyzed by critics. In "Gothic Romanticism and Rational Empiricism in Poe's 'Berenice'" David E. E. Sloane examines the tensions between poetic intuition and scientific rationalism, in order to conclude that "the merging of systems in 'Berenice' is a dramatic rejection of empirical science as it is seized upon by the inflamed mind of Egaeus, the egomaniac" who abhors the earthly while attempting to tackle the materiality of Berenice.[43] For Sloane, the end of the story questions American science, while, at the same time, parodying the traditions of the European gothic novel.[44] Louis A. Renza in "Poe's Secret Autobiography" explains that like "Ligeia," "*Eureka* propagates the notion of an entropic material spiritualism precisely in contradistinction to the 'natural supernaturalism' or intimations of immortality that permeate the writings of Poe's English and especially American Romantic peers."[45] Maurice Lee, for example, has read the horror of Poe's stories in terms of the tension between metaphysics and racism. As he writes in "Absolute Poe: His System of Transcendental Racism," "Poe struggles to assimilate his politics and metaphysics, an antinomy evident in 'Metzengerstein,' if only in nascent form."[46] According to Lee, Poe's anomalous position within antebellum literature is due to this uncomfortable amalgamation of Romantic idealism and the issue of slavery and race. More particularly, Joan Dayan in *Fables of Mind* finds that Poe's expression "engages one in a fierce seesaw motion between apparent opposites";[47] between idealism and materialism, uniting transcendental and empirical theories. Poe's stories about taint, corruption, and disability are not merely about slavery, but also about the "mysteries of identity, the riddle of bodies and minds that lived during a generation that proclaimed perfectibility . . . but that he knew was steeped in disaffection."[48] In "Amorous Bondage" she reads Poe's work in terms of "radical dehumanization" by arguing that both "etherealization" and "brutalization," the dematerialization of black men and the idealization of angelic women, are processes of sublimation.[49] Humanity is displaced

through operations that resist Enlightenment dualisms. As she explains, for most nineteenth-century theologians and anthropologists, animality is inherent in those beings that are both human and beast: women, black men, and children.[50] And in Poe's tales these "corporeal ghosts are always women."[51]

Poe brings together the mythology of the vampire and medical discourse on consumption through the representation of monstrous emaciated female bodies in order to undermine the dualism of body and spirit. His views resonate with the German idealism of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling.[52] While Poe parodies Kant, Coleridge, and the American Transcendentalists, the "Frogpondians," in his satires "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and "Never Bet the Devil Your Head," at the same time, his writing is influenced by Transcendentalism's absolute oneness. Poe's reception of Schelling and German philosophy was perhaps secondhand through Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817), the Transcendentalism of Carlyle, Cousin, de Quincey, and de Staël, as well as Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Vivian Grey* (1826).[53] As Lee points out, during the emergence of Transcendentalism in the 1830s Schelling was more widely read and better understood than other philosophers such as Hegel.[54]

In "Morella" (1835), "Loss of Breath" (1831), and "How to Write a Blackwood Article" Poe mentions the "absurd metaphysicianism"[55] of Schelling and his view on identity. In "Morella," Schelling's doctrine of identity is the focus of the narrator and the eponymous heroine's discussions. The idea of personal identity "*which at death is or is not lost forever*"[56] forms the central thesis of Schelling's *The Philosophy of Art* (1802–3; 1804–5). Poe is interested in Schelling's definition of the imagination as the power of mutual unity, where the ideal is simultaneously real and the body and mind merge into one. This is what Poe, after the ancient philosophers, calls "principium individuationis," and which describes the moment that something diverse forms into a unity. This principle of singularity is the metamorphosis of an individual into a singularity, understood as the *absolute* of singularity and totality. This absolute of life itself, beyond the dualisms of life and death, is understood negatively by Poe as the horrific contemplation of vampiric life itself, and woman's monstrosity.

According to Schelling, nature is permeated by a universal substance, the absolute, which is living force coursing through organic life and inorganic matter, spirit and nature, ideal and real. Schelling refused to distinguish between living and dead mechanical movement, and sought to understand everything as an expression of the living principle of life. In this respect, the positive principle of spirit or life penetrates and unifies harmoniously both the organic and inorganic, mind and body in a creative interaction that does not subordinate

one to the other. On the one hand, this is the expression of the good where spirit circulates through, and illuminates, nature. Human freedom consists in the striving of one's will for self-knowledge and the unity of opposites. On the other hand, evil is the false unification of opposites by the self-willing of the individual. In diverting from the path of the good, humanity's selfish will is elevated to that of universal will, an irrational persistence of the will that exemplifies true diabolical evil. Evil is then a passionate spiritualism, "a perversion of the true spirituality" that "despises sensuality and is bent on violently dominating and exploiting it."[57] What is evil then is spirit that materializes as a monstrous inversion of nature: this is the life that writhes and undulates under the pale and bloodless face of the vampire Ligeia.

Indeed the good is associated with a harmonious life and will, while evil with a perverse will. Ligeia is characterized by her passion and will for life, but when that becomes irrational and wants to rise above everything else, the "convulsive writhings of her fierce spirit" and "the intensity of her wild desire for life,—for life—but for life," become a "pitiable spectacle"[58] that challenges God's will. This is supported by Joseph Glanvill's aphorism quoted in "Ligeia," which might have been fabricated by Poe himself: "And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will."[59] For Schelling, an energetic selfhood is good and not evil as long as human will remains subordinated to the light and includes love, "for, where there is no struggle, there is no life."[60] Indeed, to a certain degree, her passion for life is positive and praised by the narrator. But Ligeia's will tears itself away from the good and becomes evil in and for itself, "a hunger of selfishness which, to the degree that it renounces the whole and unity, becomes ever more desolate, poorer, but precisely for that reason greedier, hungrier, and more venomous,"[61] pursuing a life beyond limits and against God.

Ligeia's consumptive disease can be read as the result of her misuse of freedom and the persistence of her perverse will. For Schelling, evil is similar to disease. Given the fact that Ligeia's self-will is elevated, and persists even after death, "a life emerges which, though individual, is, however, false, a life of mendacity, a growth of restlessness and decay. The most fitting comparison here is offered by disease which, as the disorder having arisen in nature through the misuse of freedom, is the true counter-part of evil or sin."[62] Ligeia's wasting disease is related to her energetic will, and more particularly her gigantic knowledge and fascination with "wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden!"[63] As the narrator admits, her "readings alone, rendered

vividly luminous the many mysteries of the transcendentalism in which we were immersed."[64] This passage can be further illuminated by another short story, "Never Bet the Devil Your Head" (1841), in which Poe parodies moralistic literature and transcendentalism. In the story the narrator tells us that the character of Toby Dammit is "affected with the transcendentals," which he diagnoses as a "disease."[65] Like with Ligeia, there was something in the "*manner*" of Dammit that the narrator finds "*queer*" but "Mr. Coleridge would have called mystical, Mr. Kant pantheistical, Mr. Carlisle [Carlyle] twistical, and Mr. Emerson hyper-fizzitistical. I began not to like it at all. Mr. Dammit's soul was in a perilous state."[66] Here Poe attacks Transcendentalism's belief in the power of the individual, inner spirituality, knowledge, and truth. With its focus on the human mind and inspiration, Transcendentalism elevates the spiritual while rejecting matter and sensual experience. In this respect, in "Ligeia," this persistence of spirit over matter is understood as evil, false, and the cause of disease.

Ligeia's vampire existence as a monstrous amalgamation of the ideal and the real is foregrounded in the horror and the disharmony between matter and spirit in the descriptions of materials permeated with vitality. Ligeia's longing and will as characteristics of life itself are foreshadowed in the animation of matter. Like Schelling, Poe is interested in dead and living movement as different expressions of the principle of life. Poe exhumes here a dark vitalism and an unnatural monstrous life: "It writhes!—it writhes!"[67] In the abbey the narrator describes "a huge censer . . . with many perforations so contrived that there writhed in and out of them, as if endued with a serpent vitality, a continual succession of parti-colored fires."[68] Like the horrific vitality of the snake-like tongues of fire writhing in and out of the censer, the arabesque figures on the tapestry material, when regarded from a certain angle, seemed hideously animated. This phantasmagoric effect gave the figures "the appearance of simple monstrosities; but upon a farther advance, this appearance gradually departed; and step by step, as the visiter moved his station in the chamber, he saw himself surrounded by an endless succession of the ghastly forms."[69] This perverse life is the same life that animates the vampire body of Ligeia, an uncanny and diabolical inversion of human life. Like Schelling, Poe smudged the line between vitalism and materialism by bringing to the fore the unnatural materiality of spirit.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher" Madeline Usher's death by a wasting disease is captured in the horror of her "suspiciously lingering smile" and "the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face."[70] What connects this story to other Poe texts of vampiric females is this disturbing and ghastly life that persists in inorganic things and beyond death. More particularly, this spirit

that permeates matter and connects bodies and things in perverse unison is witnessed in Roderick Usher's interest in books of doubles, demonic possession, and his belief in the "sentience of all vegetable things."[71] Madeline's vampiric return is associated with this "inorganic consciousness;"[72] a phantasmatic life that circulates through the stones of the house, the fungi, the decayed trees, and the silent waters of the tarn.[73] Madeline, her twin brother, and their family house and bloodline are "all sharing a single soul and meeting one common dissolution at the same moment."[74]

In "Berenice" (1835) the narrator Egaeus recounts how the fatal disease distorts the identity of the eponymous heroine. Unlike idealized depictions of beautiful corpses and consumptives, the narrator describes the horrifying results of the consumptive disease. Berenice's emaciation "was excessive, and not one vestige of the former being lurked in any single line of the contour."[75] It is at this moment, when her presence showed signs of death, that "her personal identity, has become more real to him. . . . For the destruction of her being means that he can possess her as 'a thing to admire' and 'an object of love.'"[76] Egaeus marries Berenice, not because she is beautiful in death, but because the presence of death made him see her as a real, material being, not an abstract ideal. This change of view is also associated with his own disease and alteration from being the Romantic hero and idealist, to the man of scientific reason and materialism. In this respect, both Egaeus's former idealism and his view of Berenice's pure and ideal beauty are contaminated by reason and realism. The disease of their human spirit has corrupted their physical body.[77] The presence of death is captured in the disintegrating physiognomy: "The forehead was high, and very pale, and singularly placid; and the once jetty hair fell partially over it, and overshadowed the hollow temples with innumerable ringlets, now of a vivid yellow, and jarring discordantly . . . . The eyes were lifeless, and lustreless, and seemingly pupilless, and I shrank, involuntarily from their glassy stare to the contemplation of the thin and shrunken lips. They parted; and in a smile of peculiar meaning, the teeth of the changed Berenicë disclosed themselves slowly to my view. Would to God that I had never beheld them, or that, having done so, I had died!"[78] The horrifying effects of putrefying matter contaminate idealism. In particular, the descriptions of "the white and ghastly *spectrum* of the teeth"[79] reveal this perverse union of matter and spirit; a spectral materiality that is at once horrific and evil. Egaeus desires the teeth, "one body part not subject to decay,"[80] because "they alone were present to the mental eye."[81] Egaeus imagination assigns to the teeth "a sensitive and sentient power, and, even when unassisted by the lips, a capability of moral expression."[82] For him, the teeth are ideas, matter permeated by spirit. "Berenice" culminates in "the phantasma of

the teeth" floating about with the "most vivid and hideous distinctness."[83] The contemplation of this hideous synthesis of matter and spirit is exemplary of Poe and the narrator's fears of feminine resistance and evil; an evil whose symptoms are manifested in the consumptive female body.

"Morella" brings into focus this hideous triptych of materiality, idealism, and feminine disease. Morella's consumption is related to her profound intellect. Her "powers of mind were gigantic"[84] and were consumed in the study of speculative writings such as the Transcendental philosophies of Fichte and Schelling. In particular, Morella was interested in Schelling's doctrine of the absolute identity of subject (mind) and object (matter). This principle of absolute and homogeneous unity of subject and object is, however, imagined as horrific. As Morella begins to pine away, the narrator is sickened by her tubercular body, with its crimson cheeks and prominent "blue veins upon the pale forehead."[85] Gazing into her melancholy eyes, the husband becomes "giddy with the giddiness of one who gazes downwards into some dreary and fathomless abyss."[86] While her frame is consumed, her "fragile spirit clung to its tenement of clay for many days—for many weeks and irksome months."[87] It is this uncomfortable synthesis of opposites that is dramatized through Morella's persistence to live: "I am dying—yet shall I live."[88] And, indeed, after her death, Morella's spirit lives through the body of her daughter. It is this perfect identity and sameness of mind and matter that is finally horrific. In the uncanny repetition of the dead Morella's phrases on the lips of the living one, the narrator "shuddered at its too perfect *identity*."[89] The horror of this absolutism lies in the evil spirit of Morella. As is evident in an earlier version of the story, Morella's invocation of the Blessed Virgin is linked to her sinful and forbidden knowledge.

Poe undermined the dualism of body and spirit. His vampire tales question idealism and metaphor. Matter penetrates the world of the ideal and reveals the inevitability of death, disintegration, and putrefaction. In this respect, Poe went against the dominant discourses of American Transcendentalism and medical discourse on consumption that sought to elevate spirituality and idealize materiality, thus reducing life to mysticism. In true gothic fashion, he sought to unveil the dark life writhing behind the mask of spiritualism and theological mysticism, in order to show mortality's evil aspirations to divine will. Poe attacked the "Humanity clique's"[90] Transcendental style of "mysticism for mysticism's sake," and questioned their "Carlylisms," "Euphuisms," "Merry Andrewisms," and "metaphor-run mad" style.[91] But he also rejected their progressive views on abolition and reform.[92] In this respect, he remained outside the clique of American Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, for whom human suffering or sin were insignificant and thus external possibilities.

Against their optimistic imagination, Poe was more comfortable among Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, with whom he shared a darker view of human life.[93] Harry Levin has pointed out that in Poe, Melville and Hawthorne's writings we find the gothic side of Transcendentalism.[94] But while Hawthorne and Melville mock Transcendentalism, Poe remains faithful to his strand of idealism, returning to his unique but "troubling prospects of transcendental unity."[95] Poe's treatment of Schelling's absolute identity precedes that of the Boston Transcendentalists, and thus is characterized by its own unique flavor and conventional politics.[96] In this respect, while his work does offer progressive understandings of antebellum metaphysics, he remains unable to overcome regressive ideological constructions of woman as evil, and thus other.

Poe's position within antebellum culture is indeed anomalous. Oscillating between his own thread of gothic materialism and antebellum sexual politics, he delivers the horror of powerful satanic women. While early nineteenth-century medical discourse idealized "real" sick female bodies and transformed such metaphors into (imagined) reality, Poe attacked this beatification of deathly emaciated and angelic women through the horrific contemplation of consumption and evil manifestation of spirit. On the other hand, woman's gothic materiality is understood within a discourse that sees woman as inferior, diseased, and dangerous. Not controlled by the authority of man, she can question God's will.

The corporeal and ghastly phantoms of Ligeia, Morella, Berenice, and Madeline Usher are "appalling distortions"[97] of Schellingian identity, horrible materializations of spirit. They arise from the pages of antebellum American folklore and medical discourse, fraught with beautiful and sanctified young corpses, and metamorphose through Poe's pen into satanic women. Southern belles are transformed into southern vampires, but such monsters remain other to patriarchal structures. Woman's otherness is written on her body and mind. Her vampirism and consumptive disease, evident through her physical disintegration and her satanic mind, are part of her personal identity, and thus simultaneously material and spiritual. Woman's horror, like that of Poe's tales, is that of the perfect synthesis, of the luciferian wedding of matter and spirit.

Notes

1. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 355.

2. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1991), 63.

3. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London: Martin Secker, 1933), 84.

4. Ibid., 68, 84, 70.

5. Ibid., 68, 76, 78, 84.

6. Ibid., 72.

7. Ibid., 71, 74.

8. Faye Ringel, *New England's Gothic Literature: History and Folklore of the Supernatural from the Seventeenth Through the Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 138.

9. George Stetson, "The Animistic Vampire in New England," *The American Anthropologist* 9, no. 1 (1896): 3.

10. Ringel, *New England's Gothic Literature*, 141.

11. Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 62.

12. J. Gerald Kennedy, *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 17.

13. Poe, "Ligeia," in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 2: *Tales and Sketches*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 315.

14. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman, "Introduction: Beyond 'The Problem of Poe,'" in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), xii.

15. Joan Dayan, "Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves," *American Literature* 66, no. 2 (1994): 240.

16. Ibid.

17. According to the *OED*, consumption was first used in 1398 to denote "abnormality or loss of humours, resulting in wasting (extreme weight loss) of the body; such wasting; (*obs.*). Later: disease that causes wasting of the body, *spec.* tuberculosis. Now chiefly *hist.*"

18. Katherine Ott, *Fevered Lives: Tuberculosis in American Culture Since 1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 13.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 9.

21. Ibid., 10.

22. Marli F. Weiner, with Mazie Hough, *Sex, Sickness, and Slavery: Defining Illness in the Antebellum South* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 8.

23. Lorna Duffin, "The Conspicuous Consumptive: Woman as an Invalid," in *The Nineteenth-Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World*, ed. Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 26.

24. Ott, *Fevered Lives*, 6.

25. Samuel Warren, "Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician, Ch. IV, 'Consumption,'" *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 28 (1830): 770.

26. Poe, "How to Write a Blackwood Article," in *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe (1850–1856), Vol. IV: Arthur Gordon Pym, &c.* (New York: Redfield, 1856), 233.

27. Mabbott's note (Poe), "The Fall of the House of Usher," in Mabbott, *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 2:394. See also Margaret Alterton, *Origins of Poe's Critical Theory* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Humanistic Series, 1925).

28. Thomas Henderson, "Cases of Pulmonary Consumption, with Observations," *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 8 (1831): 340–41.

29. William Sweetser, *A Treatise on Consumption: Embracing an Inquiry into the Influence Exerted upon It by Journeys, Voyages, and Change of Climate* (Boston: T. H. Carter, 1836), 35–36.

30. John Murray, *A Treatise on Pulmonary Consumption: Its Prevention and Remedy* (London: Whittaker, Treacher, and Arnot, 1830), 3.

31. Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (1933; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), 27.

32. Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 16.

33. Ibid., 18–19.

34. David Barnes, *The Making of a Social Disease: Tuberculosis in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 69.

35. Poe, "Ligeia," 325.

36. According to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century belief in vitalism, and particularly John Hunter's vitalitic ideas, blood contained the principle of life itself, a material agent that he called *materia vitae diffusa*. See John Hunter, *A Treatise on the Blood, Inflammation, and Gun-Shot Wounds* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1828), 113.

37. John C. Gunn, *Gunn's Domestic Medicine; or, Poor Man's Friend, in the Hours of Affliction, Pain and Sickness*, 4th ed. (Springfield, Ohio: John M. Gallagher, 1835), 228.

38. Poe, "Ligeia," 312, 311.

39. Ibid., 316.

40. Ibid., 324, 327.

41. Ibid., 315.

42. Ibid., 328–29.

43. David E. E. Sloane, "Gothic Romanticism and Rational Empiricism in Poe's 'Berenice,'" *American Transcendental Quarterly: A Journal of New England Writers* 19 (1973): 24.

44. Ibid.

45. Louis A. Renza, "Poe's Secret Autobiography," in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 78.

46. Maurice S. Lee, "Absolute Poe: His System of Transcendental Racism," *American Literature* 75, no. 4 (2003): 757.

47. Joan Dayan, *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe's Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 171.

48. Joan Dayan, "Poe, Persons, and Property," in *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 120–21.

49. Dayan, "Amorous Bondage," 243–44.

50. Ibid., 244.

51. Ibid.

52. For Poe's literary references to Schelling, see Thomas S. Hansen and Burton R. Pollin, *The German Face of Edgar Allan Poe: A Study of Literary References in His Work* (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1995), 80.

53. See Lee, "Absolute Poe," 759.

54. Ibid., 763.

55. Poe's footnote, "Loss of Breath," in Mabbott, *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 2:78.

56. Poe, "Morella," in ibid., 2:226.

57. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (New York: Verso, 1996), 69.

58. Poe, "Ligeia," 317.

59. Ibid., 310.

60. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (SW 399–400), trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 63.

61. Ibid. (SW 390–91), 55.
62. Ibid. (OA 440–43), 34.
63. Poe, "Ligeia," 316.
64. Ibid.
65. Poe, "Never Bet the Devil Your Head," *Graham's Magazine* 19 (1841): 126.
66. Ibid., 125.
67. Poe, "Ligeia," 319.
68. Ibid., 321.
69. Ibid., 322.
70. Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," 410.
71. Ibid., 408.
72. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 80.
73. Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," 408.
74. H. P. Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature," in *Dagon, and Other Macabre Tales* (London: Panther, 1985), 466.
75. Poe, "Berenice," in Mabbott, *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 2:215.
76. Arthur A. Brown, "Literature and the Impossibility of Death: Poe's 'Berenice,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 50, no. 4 (1996): 458.
77. Sloane, "Gothic Romanticism and Rational Empiricism in Poe's 'Berenice,'" 24.
78. Poe, "Berenice," 215.
79. Ibid.
80. Joan Dayan, "The Identity of Berenice," *Studies in Romanticism* 23, no.4 (1984): 501.
81. Poe, "Berenice," 215.
82. Ibid., 216.
83. Ibid.
84. Poe, "Morella," 225.
85. Ibid., 227.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid., 228.
89. Ibid., 234.
90. Burton R. Pollin, "The Living Writers of America: A Manuscript by Edgar Allan Poe," in *Studies in the American Renaissance*, ed. Joel Myerson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 165.
91. Kent P. Ljungquist, "The Poet as Critic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 15.
92. Ibid.
93. Later, as Ljungquist points out, in 1848, Poe will caustically describe Hawthorne as a "Puritan Tieck" (ibid., 15).
94. See Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1958).
95. Lee, "Absolute Poe," 773.
96. Ibid.
97. Poe, "Berenice," 213.