Morbid Conditions: Poe and the Sublimity of Disease

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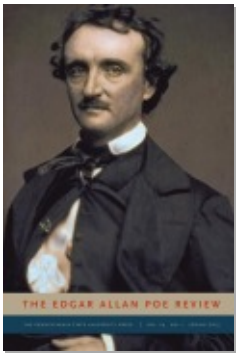

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Morbid Conditions

Poe and the Sublimity of Disease

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Abstract

At first glance, Edgar Allan Poe's worldview as presented in his writings seems to deal more with experiences of uncanny horror than sublimity. However, Poe's perversity cannot simply be understood as calling attention to the horror of existence. Through an analysis of "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) and "Berenice" (1835), this essay claims that accessing the sublime experience in Poe depends on a combination of perverseness, disease, and the uncanny. Because Roderick Usher and Egaeus are able, through their monomania, to dissolve meaning in the objects around them, their contemplation of these newly unheimlich objects gives them access to the inexpressibility and ineffability of the sublime state.

I employ Poe's essay "The Imp of the Perverse," which focuses on "perverseness as a radical, primitive, irreducible faculty or sentiment of the soul, the propensity to do wrong for the wrong's sake," in my treatment of these stories. Although an obsession with the abyss is what drives these characters over its edge, my analysis reveals that only perverseness makes the sublime experience possible. The result is not the upward transcendence of eighteenth-century philosophers like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, but rather a journey downward to a total loss of control and a destruction of the self rather than an affirmation of the individual intellect over natural forces. However, this collapse accords with the cosmology Poe sets forth in Eureka, *which posits that all things diffuse and radiate throughout the universe from a common source, eventually dissolving back into oneness.*

To-day I wear these chains, and am *here*!
To-morrow I shall be fetterless!—*but where*?
—Poe, "The Imp of the Perverse"

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This essay examines Edgar Allan Poe's revisions of the sublime aesthetic in his short stories "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) and "Berenice" (1835). Poe disrupts his notions of the sublime experience as uplifting by calling attention to the horror of that experience as central to the definition of sublimity. Other nineteenth-century thinkers, among them Poe's contemporary, Ralph Waldo Emerson, maintain that the sublime experience is transcendent because it is achieved by traveling to new heights, both literally and figuratively.[1] For his contemporaries, the mind's journey toward sublimity is one upward that moves through stages of awe and removed fear to reach transcendence and an enriched way of looking at the world that ultimately reifies the human experience. For Poe, however, the path to sublimity is an internal one, sparked by the domestic, unheimlich return of the repressed rather than a grandiose experience of the external world. Poe's sublimity leads not to a Kantian mastery over nature, but through perversity and disease, into regions inconceivable until after death.

In Poe's tales, the sublime experience does not ultimately reside in an external force or object; rather, it is the uncanny experience of the self-within-the-self.[2] Poe's writings discover this experience of uncanny horror in the mind, but they also hint at a greater truth: a void hidden behind this horror, accessible through a perversity that leads to dissolution. Poe's perverse protagonists suffer from hyperesthesia that manifests in monomaniacal overconcentration, which dissolves the meanings of even the most familiar and mundane of objects, making those objects uncanny, or unheimlich. Employing the aesthetic philosophy set forward in "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845), I argue that it is precisely the dissolution of meaning and the resulting experience of the uncanny that become sublime for Poe's characters. In Poe's tales, the protagonists' diseased states allow them access to a special version of sublimity, which Poe reveals to be the experience of a terrible void incomprehensible to the sane human mind. Paradoxically, it is only with the embrace of this terror through death, the ultimate dissolution of the self, that any kind of transcendence may be achieved. In Poe's universe, this moment occurs when his characters meet their own destructions, both literal and metaphorical.

Edmund Burke, perhaps the most influential theorist of the sublime in the eighteenth century, notes in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) that the sublime is aroused by "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror." However, Burke's critical caveat on the sublime experience is that danger must not "press too nearly," at which

point it would become simply terrible rather delightful, thereby negating any potential for the sublime.[3] Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), builds significantly on the theory of the sublime by maintaining that the sublime experience is possible only because of the mind's power over the natural world, despite our physical powerlessness in the face of threatening events.[4] Both theories of the sublime represent it as a positive force that ultimately sustains and upholds the self-contained subject who, by way of Kantian reason, is able to rise above the limitations of the natural world. However, the irrationality inherent to the sublime experience means that sublimity, at some level, always defies comprehensive explanation and understanding.

In the end, the theories put forth by Burke and Kant do not account for the breadth of aesthetic classifications that existed, particularly in Dark Romantic authors like Edgar Allan Poe, who seems to twist, even to invert, these categories. To address this gap in the aesthetic theories of Burke and Kant, studies of sublimity and of Dark Romanticism arose. However, most of these analyses do not identify any positive potential in experiences of the dark sublime, instead regarding it as a solipsistic, self-consuming tendency.[5] But to code Poe's dark sublime as wholly negative fails to take into account the effects of what I term, after Poe, "positive dissolution." The sublime, for Poe, not only results in the entrapment and splitting of the self, but also includes a positive aspect, which, for his perverse protagonists, allows them a transcendence through death and recognizes entropy as a force that can provide a fulfillment impossible for the living. Far from representing the failure of the sublime, Poe's revisions to Burke and Kant work instead to recognize the possibility—and promise—of transcendence downward, through dissolution and the embrace of annihilation. Thus perversity, terror, and a nothingness that engulfs and annihilates the self are the key elements of what I argue is Poe's revised notion of the sublime, which reflects the entropic tendencies of an unknowable cosmos. However, this revised sublime, though grounded in horror, holds within it the potentialities of the greatest artistic expression and unification with the unknowable.

The Imp of the Perverse

The sublime experience in both "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Berenice" depends on the madness of their protagonists, whose diseased states make them more susceptible to the dissolutive powers of Poe's revised sublimity. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Roderick Usher's encounter with the abyss leads to the live burial of his sister and his own death at the story's end. In "Berenice," Egaeus's discovery of Berenice's teeth and the realization of what he

has done constitute his fall from the precipice into downward transcendence. Both characters are decidedly *perverse*—morbidly fascinated with their family heritages and their surviving (female) relatives, they are afflicted with diseases that cause hypersensitivity and monomaniacal concentration. However, this perversity also allows for the possibility of positive dissolution.

Before further attempting to analyze the role of disease in Poe's sublimity, we must first examine Poe's precise feelings on the relation of perversity to negative sublimity. In "The Imp of the Perverse," he writes:

> We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss—we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink away from the danger. Unaccountably we remain. By slow degrees our sickness, and dizziness, and horror, become merged in a cloud of unnameable feeling. By gradations, still more imperceptible, this cloud assumes shape, as did the vapor from the bottle out of which arose the genius in the Arabian Nights. But out of this *our* cloud upon the precipice's edge, there grows into palpability, a shape, far more terrible than any genius, or any demon of a tale, and yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height. (829)

The essay's focus on "perverseness as a radical, primitive, irreducible faculty or sentiment of the soul, the propensity to do wrong for the wrong's sake," to go against the impulses of life, has been read by many, including Stanley Cavell, as Poe's statement that "thinking will inherently betray the thinker."[6] But perverseness does not always constitute a betrayal. While the thought of the abyss drives Poe's perverse characters over its edge, this thought also allows for the possibility of the sublime experience, which paradoxically seems dependent on perversity. In fact, it is exactly this betrayal that Poe's perverse characters unconsciously move toward as they "attempt to express the ineffable."[7] The result is not the upward transcendence of eighteenth-century philosophers, but rather a journey downward, through inexpressible regions of horror, and finally to a total loss of control and a destruction of the self rather than an affirmation of the individual intellect over natural forces. Poe's sublime experience, then, rests precisely on the diseased embrace of terror and the uncanny, because only those characters afflicted with hyperesthetic monomania are able to erase meaning and experience the sublime dissolution of the most ordinary of objects.

In "The Imp of the Perverse," the abyss signifies man's desire to embrace his own annihilation. This desire, like Freud's death drive, is not necessarily willful, but remains incomprehensible even to those characters in its thrall, heightening the horror of the experience. Usher's and Egaeus's illnesses accelerate their natural movement toward entropy and death while simultaneously making them more sensitive to this movement. As artists, they seek to manifest the truths that only come with death while they still exist in the physical world. Their entropic diseases enable them to contaminate the lives of the characters around them in their attempts to bring the dissolution of death into life, but these illnesses also make even the most ordinary things uncanny. As overconcentration dissolves meaning, sublimity begins to manifest in newly emptied signifiers.

Poe's revised sublime, then, manifests as a force that exists *within* the domestic spaces that should be most familiar and comfortable—the house, the body. These spaces serve as cracks, much like the crack in the Usher mansion, that open to the horror imbedded within life itself. Poe's revision of Gothic tradition is precisely that he moves horrific forces from without to the horror that arises from "the mind isolated within itself," in which "the 'will' overrules all moral desiderata in its overwhelming quest for self-awareness—for going beyond into the unspeakable and ineluctable sublime condition."[8] Thus transcendence, for Poe, must be understood as not necessarily transcendence upward into some higher, better form, but, as Kenneth Burke points out, simply a movement to a realm beyond. According to Burke, "Transcendence is . . . the building of a *terministic bridge* whereby one realm is *transcended* by being viewed *in terms of* a realm 'beyond' it." Thus, the possibility for "transcendence downward" opens up, through the fall into the abyss and the embrace of dissolution.[9]

Death and nothingness, for Poe, represent the ultimate states of being, where the cosmic truths hinted at by art actually exist. Poe's long prose poem *Eureka* (1848) details the process by which all things diffuse and radiate throughout the universe, eventually returning and collapsing into oneness, "a novel Universe swelling into existence and then subsiding into nothingness, at every throb of the Heart Divine" (1356).[10] The poet can illuminate, fleetingly, the barest reflection of these truths from beyond the grave, but they are by nature unattainable, much like the women in Poe's writings, who, in death, are more desirable and more beautiful because of their unattainability. Poe's statement that "the most poetical topic in the world" is "the death . . . of a beautiful woman" reveals his own belief that the deepest poetic and aesthetic truths can come only through death—if not the actual experience of it, then its contemplation ("Philosophy of Composition," 1379).[11] Poe's perverse characters, who actively seek their own

dissolution and the dissolution of those around them, are the most successful artists, the closest to grasping the truths that lie beyond death. Their proximity to death is heightened due to their connections to disease, insanity, and the macabre.

Disease, especially the mental ailments of Roderick and Egaeus, is connected with a hypersensitivity that is especially attuned to "the sublime appearance," which, according to Thomas Weiskel, "promises an overabundance of stimulation to which the imagination can react passively or actively: either the imagination wishes to be inundated in the network, and thus risks experiencing a loss of identity or 'anxiety of incorporation,' or it desires to . . . assimilate external reality into the substance of mind."[12] I would revise Weiskel's understanding of sublime experience for Poe, whose characters both passively and actively embrace the overstimulation promised by sublimity, seeking simultaneous dissolution as symbolized by their own disruptive diseases, but also striving to assimilate others, especially female characters within the stories, into their dissolving realities.

Poe's most perverse characters, for all their strangeness, are still meant to be sympathetic. We are as shocked as Roderick to find Madeline returned from the grave, and we are as appalled as Egaeus upon his discovery of Berenice's teeth. Along with their more sympathetic characteristics, Roderick and Egaeus possess artistic temperaments, making them creative forces in the stories. Paradoxically, though, their artistic urges result in tragedy. Roderick's painting of the "immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel . . . without interruption of device" symbolizes the unfathomable endlessness and blankness of death, while also alluding to Madeline's premature burial in the vault below the main house ("Fall," 325). Egaeus's obsession with Berenice's "excessively white" teeth is decidedly aesthetic, and also points to his own preoccupation with the erasure death brings ("Berenice," 230). Poe's romanticization of the diseased, sensitive state is thus in part due to his own philosophy—that death and dissolution reveal the ultimate aesthetic truths and enable a final unification with the divine. This unification is impossible for the living because it uncovers what "the dream we call 'life' . . . has momentarily concealed."[13]

Poe's perverse characters always fit this very specific mold, which allows them to perform the actions necessary to set in motion the journey toward entropy. Roderick Usher and Egaeus are aristocratic, from long and illustrious lineages remembered explicitly for their unusually heightened creative faculties. Both are also essentially solitary—Roderick lives alone, save for his equally introverted sister, on the Usher family's crumbling estate, and Egaeus never sees anyone but Berenice and the occasional servant in his family's mansion.

The tumbling, aristocratic locations of these stories, then, enable the solitary existences of Poe's destroyer–artists. We can understand the Usher estate as an uncanny space that ruptures the sphere of healthy domesticity and opens the door to horror. In "Berenice," this uncanny space is even more concentrated—it is the library, where Egaeus's mother died, and where he was born (apparently in that order). It is also where he spends all his conscious time for the duration of the story. However, each of these spaces houses another uncanny space within it—that of the protagonists' body/mind itself.[14] For Poe, perversity is something that pits the body/mind against itself, that moves in competition, rather than concordance, with life. Under the influence of perversity, the body/mind works *against* the desire to sustain life, with the goal of achieving ideal existence in the unknowable realms beyond life. This betrayal is represented by the diseases Roderick and Egaeus suffer, which are, in turn, echoed by the diseases of their female companions, Madeline and Berenice.

Female disease, especially a specific kind of "wasting" disease, has long been a preoccupation of Poe studies. Poe's own claim in "The Philosophy of Composition" has ensured that dead women remain a central focus of Poe criticism. The woman's passive wasting in many of these tales, though, functions as a type of inverse of the man's equally mysterious, and usually far stranger, ailment. While normal faculties and tendencies are *heightened* in male characters, they seem to be *lessened* in their female counterparts, perhaps in order to set up the perverse events of the story with greater ease (namely, live burials).[15] How, then, do their strange illnesses play into the notion of Poe's terrible, perverse sublime? While both Roderick and Egaeus could easily be termed insane, this insanity takes a very specific form connected with sensation and concentration. The metaphor of the entropic body as discussed by Elana Gomel is an appropriate way to enter a discussion of Poe's (and his characters') preoccupation with illness. She writes that "the contagious body is the most characteristic modality of apocalyptic corporeality. . . . Pestilence shatters the symbolic defences of the individual self and dissolves the boundaries of the individual body."[16] As death is the ultimate experience, bringing with it the ultimate truths, so the entropic, diseased body comes nearest to attaining it. Its ability to contaminate allows its own dissolution to spread, moving everything around it toward entropy, and, finally, to Poe's revised sublimity.

A Family Evil

By the time the narrator is reintroduced to Roderick Usher, the fate of the Usher lineage is sealed. The "barely perceptible fissure" that runs down the

front of the house is in place, and by the end of the story the mansion and its inhabitants will fall into the tarn ("Usher," 320). The narrator's first encounter with the crumbling estate is couched in the vocabulary of terror, as he tries and fails to achieve any sort of sublime transcendence or to reveal any higher truth save that of despair and desolation.

> There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubts, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our death. (317)[17]

The narrator's inability to conjure the sublime from his first encounter with the house ensures his survival, but also means that he is outside the class of the perverted artists that achieve the darkly sublime experience. Dennis A. Foster writes that "the pleasure of perverts begins where ordinary peoples' imaginations stop dead."[18] Here, then, is the first instance of the failure of the (ordinary) human mind to make sense of the horrific, and the first intrusion of the uncanny into the tale.

To understand the place of uncanny horror in Poe's notion of sublimity, we must turn to Freud's seminal essay on the uncanny, which he understood as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar." For Freud, an experience of the uncanny occurs when something "intended to remain secret, hidden, away . . . has come into the open . . . something that has been repressed and now returns." Freud calls the haunted house one of the most potent examples of the uncanny because of the mind's unwillingness to accept "the idea of [its] own mortality."[19] Thus, the effectiveness of the uncanny or haunted house lies in its status as a memento mori, which in turn sparks "the primitive fear of the dead."[20] The Usher mansion falls into this category of the uncanny, for although it is not haunted by the ghastly revenants of the typical ghost story, its exterior reflects the decay and disease within its walls, where the story's true specters, the last of the Usher line, hide themselves, barely alive, away from the world. However, the uncanny does not negate the sublimity of the house. Rather, the uncanny

house and its inhabitants, shut off so long from outside influences, stand on the edge of Poe's precipice, here represented by the tarn, which "close[s] sullenly and silently over the fragments" of the collapsed house at the tale's end (336). The scene reminds us that Poe's sublime is an internal force, a domestic return of the repressed rather than the grandiose and awe-inspiring experience of Burkean sublimity.

Both awe and fear are part of the conventional sublime experience, but here transcendence is modified so that intense fear is never left behind. This fear is bound up with the experience of the uncanny, most obviously with the uncanny house. The house, the space designated for human, specifically familial, interaction, and bound up with ideas of comfort and tranquility, has become, like Roderick, infected, simultaneously haunted by and haunting its occupants and reflecting their own mental and physical states. Roderick also suffers from an oversensitivity to the estate. The narrator becomes aware through Roderick's "broken and equivocal hints, another singular feature of his mental condition":

> He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth—in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated—an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit—an effect which the *physique* of the gray walls and turrets of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought upon the *morale* of his existence. (323)

Roderick's strange disease, which heightens his sensitivity to everything from food to certain types of music to the point of extreme torment, seems at first outside of the major developments of the plot—the live burial of Madeline, her escape, and the subsequent destruction of all that is Usher. Roderick's ailment, though, is key to understanding both the story as well as Poe's ideas of the perversity and horror that form the experience of the terrible sublime. One way to understand Roderick's disease is by terming it hypochondriasis. In this reading, Roderick becomes ill because, given his family's history and their naturally heightened sensitivity and creativity, he *expects* to become ill.[21] If this is indeed the case, his illness does fit with Poe's idea of perversity—Roderick's body and mind works against his own best interests (i.e., the interests of maintaining life) by becoming and staying ill. He "vividly desires" illness and, finally, annihilation ("Imp," 829).

The site of Roderick's body becomes one defined by its disintegration. Roderick's illness transforms him into Gomel's entropic body, in which a physical or mental infection spreads, plague-like, and finally moves from the site of initial contamination to bodies nearby.[22] Because the entropic body obviously acts against life rather than in concord with it, it must be understood as perverse, at least by Poe's definition. Roderick's body/mind, mirrored by the diseased house itself, becomes the site of the text's horror. Sickness thus not only defines everything Usher, but also begins to contaminate the narrator, who feels influenced by Roderick's madness. As Jonathan Cook has noted, "In Usher's allegedly 'disordered fancy,' the family mansion, like the sterile family itself, is under a kind of entropic curse."[23]

Roderick's malady is thus the key to understanding the events of the story and, by extension, Poe's revised sublimity, for although the story's horrific ending marks the end of the Usher family, the complete dissolution of Roderick, Madeline, and the house is the perverse, but also the sublime, outcome of the events leading up to it. At the story's conclusion, the house falls into its own reflection. It is essentially swallowed up by itself, much as Roderick's self-consuming tendencies (mirrored in Madeline's own personality-consuming catalepsy) lead him to his own death. We must remember, though, that in Poe's philosophy, those who embrace the perverse and seek dissolution are the true artists, privy to sublime truths beyond the grave that are inaccessible to the rest of us.

Positive Dissolution

In Poe's earlier story "Berenice," the narrator is himself also the perverse character and the central focus of the tale. The object of his perversity, Berenice, suffers from a cataleptic disorder not unlike Madeline's, and is prey to a similar fate. Egaeus, like Roderick, is afflicted with a macabre monomania, but while Roderick's is due to hypersensitivity, Egaeus's takes the form of hyper-concentration. Poe highlights his protagonist's artistic temperament from the story's beginning, when Egaeus describes his hereditary line as "a race of visionaries" (225). Egaeus, even more so than Roderick, exists in a world separate from other men, in which "the realities of the world affect [him] as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams" replace his material existence (226). Egaeus's family estate again provides the gothic setting as the uncanny house "haunted" by the characters of the story. The reader is told that at least one death has occurred within the house's walls—that of Egaeus's mother, who died in the library, perhaps even before her son's birth. The library, as I have mentioned before, is the uncanny locus of this

tale, filled with the "peculiar" books of which Egaeus refuses even to speak (225). Egaeus's connection with the library is explicitly a reflective relationship. Full of perverse, unspeakable tomes, the library mirrors the condition of Egaeus's overly attentive, coldly calculating mind, a mind capable of thinking "*que tous ses dents etaient des idées*" (231).[24] Egaeus's disease forces him to contemplate "even the most ordinary objects of the universe" until they become completely meaningless; thus the end result of his monomaniacal impulses is dissolution of meaning, and in Berenice's case this takes the most gruesome form (226).

Berenice, like the majority of Poe's women characters, serves mainly as a prop. Never given the chance to speak within the tale, her importance is rather to be a beautiful, sick, and ultimately dead and desecrated woman. Notwithstanding this fact, it is important to note that Poe sets Berenice up initially as a foil for Egaeus. While he spends his life in the library, "in ill health and buried in gloom," consuming and consumed by the volumes around him, she is "agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy." With the onset of her illness, though, her role as a foil shifts to one not unlike the role of Madeline in relation to Roderick Usher—she becomes a mirror image of her cousin, given to falling into trance states, much as he falls into deep and immobile contemplation. However, the key feature of Berenice's illness is its erasure of her personality: "Disease—a fatal disease—fell like the simoom upon her frame, and even while I gazed upon her, the spirit of change swept over her, pervading her mind, her habits, and her character, and, in a manner the most subtle and terrifying, disturbing even the identity of her person! Alas! the destroyer came and went, and the victim—where was she? I knew her not—or knew her no longer as Berenice" (226). The disease dissolves Berenice, then, much as Egaeus's own illness causes him to dissolve the significance of objects in his contemplation of them. Rather than being precisely a mirror image of Egaeus, then, Berenice, as the object of his gaze, reveals the contagious and entropic nature of his own malady, which spreads to his once-lively cousin and consumes her personality. Egaeus remarks that her affliction takes the form of "a species of epilepsy not unfrequently terminating in trance itself—trance very nearly resembling *positive dissolution*" (227; emphasis mine).

It is only after Berenice begins to waste away that Egaeus becomes fascinated with her, not as an individual with her own agency and desires, but as both object of his obsession and as his own gateway into the sublime experience. Egaeus, like Roderick, possesses an artistic temperament, but his "art" is more debased—it is Berenice's body itself, degraded and deformed after he extracts her teeth. The sublime is, for Poe, always connected to bodily experiences of ecstasy and suffering—sometimes both simultaneously. Egaeus

observes Berenice's wasting with intense interest, but he ultimately focuses his monomania on the teeth, which, unlike the rest of Berenice, do not change. The teeth's perfection in the wasted face is, for the reader, a grotesque image, but for Egaeus, as well as for Poe's other perverse characters, it connotes sublimity, symbolizing for Egaeus the perfection of the void.[25] The "idées" they promise will only reveal themselves after his own death, which he, in desiring the teeth, desires above all else.

The association of the teeth with both death and whiteness links them to his disorder, which causes him to contemplate things until they become meaningless and are effectively erased. White is thus the color of erasure, of the positive dissolution and the unknowability of Poe's sublime. Poe's sublimity here depends on the uncanny erasure of borders between life and death and self and other. While this happens in violent, unspeakable ways in Poe's stories, it also fits with the cosmology set forth in *Eureka*. If we are all part of an original spark of existence, the borders between us are at some level an illusion—Poe's central idea that "a diffusion from unity involves a tendency to return into unity—a tendency ineradicable until satisfied" (*Eureka*, 1278). With Egaeus, then, Poe reiterates that, while living, we are unable to fully fathom the truth of our existences, and that this truth lies only in regions beyond life, when we have effectively been dissolved and consumed by the abyss. Egaeus himself speaks of this in a telling passage early in the story. He writes that he possesses memories of "aerial forms—of spiritual and meaning eyes—of sounds, musical yet sad—a remembrance which will not be excluded; a memory like a shadow, vague, variable, indefinite, unsteady; and life a shadow, too, in the impossibility of my getting rid of my getting rid of it while the sunlight of my reason shall exist" ("Berenice," 225). In Poe's worldview, we can read this recollection of the preexistence of the soul in a single unity, and the desire to reclaim the truths of this existence as what drives Egaeus to his depraved act against Berenice. The crime is thus inextricably tied to Egaeus's disease, which infects and dissolves the objects of his contemplations, and is his own perverse attempt at bringing destruction and dissolution to himself and whatever exists around him, making his, too, a decidedly "entropic" body.

Egaeus's fascination calls to mind two episodes in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) that will aid me in further elaborating the sublimity of Berenice's white teeth. The first parallel comes when Pym and the remainder of the crew of the *Grampus* think they are being rescued by another ship, which they discover is filled with bloated, decaying corpses. In a moment that recalls the teeth of Berenice, Pym comments on the ship's captain, who "seemed by his manner to be encouraging us to have patience, nodding to us in a cheerful

though rather odd way, and smiling constantly, so as to display a set of the most brilliantly white teeth."[26] He soon discovers that the brilliant smile of his potential savior is due to the fact that a voracious seagull has eaten his lips. The second episode comes at the abrupt end of Pym's narrative, when Dirk Peters, Pym, and their captive, Nu-Nu, set off into the Antarctic Ocean after being held on the island of Tsalal and discover it to be "of a milky consistency and hue." The narrative breaks off suddenly when they are met with a "shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow" (*Pym*, 173, 175). In both *Pym* and "Berenice," then, whiteness connotes death, but also, paradoxically, serves as a potential point of transition into another world filled with unknown knowledge—at this point Pym is effectively swallowed up by the sea, the white figure, and the narrative.

Although Burke does not explicitly mention white as a color productive of the sublime (rather, he classes it more often with the beautiful, considering darkness and obscurity to be more sublime), for Poe, whiteness represents an ultimate unknowability, the possibility of complete erasure of the self, and the paleness of death.[27] "Perfect whiteness," when coupled with the immensity of the figure rising out of the Antarctic Ocean, initiates the meaningless (because unutterable) passage into the sublime void. Although Pym supposedly survives the encounter, it is important that this is where his voice is replaced by Poe's. The implication here is that language is impossible for those who have moved beyond death into positive dissolution. The loss of Pym's narration here indicates that sublimity dissolves "meaningful structures, incapable of sustaining themselves, [which] collapse in upon one another; in so doing they can be said to call attention to the very 'fall' of language."[28]

What are we to make of Poe's grotesque sublime? Why are the idées of sublimity so connected with an uncanny materiality—with the very physical implications of live burials and pulled teeth? It seems as though Poe wishes to remind us of the physicality of death at every turn, remaining mysterious about what lies beyond it. Dayan writes, "Nowhere does Poe give us an idea delivered of its fleshly traces. In fact, when he writes tales that most fully tackle the 'big ideas,' he makes sure that . . . they have the most earthly smell, the most material and tangible outline." We can perhaps agree with Dayan's skepticism in the following passage: "How indeed should we read the celebrated end of *Eureka*, the flash of all things into a common embrace, when that consolidation has been preceded by the more lurid coupling of Roderick and Madeline Usher? And when Poe sets the stage for resurrection but catches grave clothes on nails, lets teeth scatter, and leaves characters hanging suspended until a fourth-day

return or indeterminate putrefaction, what are we to do with his Christian framework?"[29]

If we are to find any positivity in Poe's negative sublimity, it is that the experience of life exists alongside the presence (but also the promise) of nothingness and the abyss. Our efforts to allay our fears only "accelerate the increase" of those fears to bring us to the realization that all is not well, be it within a space as vast as the universe, or as localized as the body ("Usher," 319). For Poe, the body is yet another unknown region, something that lies partially outside our control and thus can become diseased and, ultimately, entropic. In the end, the body itself marks the border of this void, and is in fact our point of passage into the "immensely long and rectangular vault" of Roderick's painting, which ends in the transcendence of death (325). This transcendence—not up, but beyond—"is by no means confined to such 'tender-minded' modes of expression as we find in the explicit Transcendentalism of an Emerson."[30] Poe's darker speculations on his particular kind of sublimity make his contribution to the philosophy of the sublime uniquely different from contemporary notions, because it relies on a degeneration of body and mind rather than an affirmation of life. Poe's belief that all things are connected and will eventually collapse back into one another thus motivates the artists' he creates in his stories to pursue an entropic transcendence. Despite the fact that Poe's perverse characters become "victim[s] of [their] own imagining" in their journeys toward self-consumption and entropy, it is only by embracing this entropy that true sublimity, which lies beyond death, can be uncovered.[31]

Notes

1. Kenneth Burke notes that Emerson's "Nature" is "an idealistic exercise in transcendence up." See "I, Eye, Ay: Concerning Emerson's Early Essay on 'Nature,' and the Machinery of Transcendence," in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 189.

2. Although the idea of the self-within-the-self is shared by Emerson, who viewed this inner self in solely positive terms, deeming it "genius," Poe figures this inner self as the imp of the perverse, an "Arch Fiend." See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays: First Series* (1841), available at http://www.emersoncentral.com/selfreliance.htm; and Edgar Poe, "The Black Cat," in *Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 606. Further references to Poe's tales will be from this edition and noted parenthetically.

3. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 67.

4. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987). Kant writes that "the irresistibility of [nature's] power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time

it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of nature and a superiority over nature . . . whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion" (§ 28, 261–62).

5. Key texts on Dark Romanticism include Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Jack G. Voller, "The Power of Terror: Burke and Kant in the House of Usher," *Poe Studies/Dark Romanticism* 21, no. 3 (1988): 27–35; Dennis Pahl, "Sounding the Sublime: Poe, Burke, and the (Non)Sense of Language," *Poe Studies/Dark Romanticism* 42, no. 1 (2009), 45; Michael J. Hoffman, *The Subversive Vision: American Romanticism in Literature* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1973), and "The House of Usher and Negative Romanticism," *Studies in Romanticism* 4, no. 3 (1965): 158–68; David Ketterer, *The Rationale of Deception in Poe* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); and G. R. Thompson, ed., *Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1974).

6. Stanley Cavell, "Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)," in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe,* ed. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 20, 22.

7. Ronald Bieganowski, "The Self-Consuming Narrator in Poe's 'Ligeia' and 'Usher,'" *American Literature* 60, no. 2 (1988): 175.

8. Clive Bloom, *Gothic Horror: A Guide for Students and Readers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3, 11.

9. Burke, "I, Eye, Ay," 187, 189.

10. See Maurice Beebe's reading of *Eureka* in *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 128.

11. He further outlines these views further in his essay on "The Poetic Principle," in which he writes of our "inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth . . . those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses" (1436).

12. Weiskel, *Romantic Sublime*, 16–18.

13. Joan Dayan, *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 202.

14. I am understanding the perverse body and mind to function as a single, joined entity in Poe's tales of terror.

15. In these stories, it is the men of Poe's texts rather than the women who gaze into the dreaded abyss, and who succumb to the hideous desires of perversity with very little nudging. Two exceptions to the mostly male perverse protagonists are Ligeia and Morella, good examples of Poe's willingness to mix aesthetic categories by heightening (or distorting) the beautiful into the terrible and sublime. See Frederick Burwick, "Edgar Allan Poe: The Sublime and the Grotesque," *Prism(s): Essays in Romanticism* 8 (2000): 91.

16. Elana Gomel, "The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body," *Twentieth Century Literature* 46, no. 4 (2000): 406–16.

17. The narrator's views on sublimity are closer to the philosophies of Burke and Kant, echoing their views on the necessity of distance from terror.

18. Dennis A. Foster, *Sublime Enjoyment: On the Perverse Motive in American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 48–49, 43. Also see Blake Hobby on the narrator, "The Fall of the House of Usher," in *Bloom's Literary Themes: The Sublime*, ed. Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby (New York: Infobase, 2010), 304.

19. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 124, 132, 147–48.

20. Freud goes on to say that "some would award the crown of the uncanny to the idea of being buried alive, only apparently dead" (ibid., 150), a point also very relevant for my argument.

21. See Gillian Brown; "The Poetics of Extinction," in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 330–45.

22. Gomel's primary example of the entropic body in Poe is "The Masque of the Red Death," a story which I won't have the space to discuss here but which would also work with my analysis of the necessity of entropy and dissolution in Poe's version of sublimity. See also Renata R. Mautner Wasserman, "The Self, the Mirror, the Other: 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" *Poe Studies* 10, no. 2 (1977): 34.

23. Jonathan A. Cook, "Poe and the Apocalyptic Sublime: 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" *Papers on Language and Literature: A Quarterly Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature* 48, no. 1 (2010): 10.

24. The French text here translates to "that all [of Berenice's teeth are] ideas."

25. Foster writes that "when [Egaeus] takes the teeth, he slips form the socially accepted fetish [books] to [an] earlier, more abject one" (*Sublime Enjoyment*, 41). Arthur Brown notes that "the teeth are that part of a human face that remains after death, belonging less to the face than to the skull. In them Egaeus feels the terror of existence after death—he sees death as other than death. . . . What this presence of undying death makes clear to Egaeus is that he himself is not yet dead." See "Literature and the Impossibility of Death: Poe's 'Berenice,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 50, no. 4 (1996): 459.

26. Edgar Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, and Related Tales*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (Oxford: New York University Press, 1994), 80.

27. The same argument could be made for Melville and his white whale.

28. Dennis Pahl, *Architects of the Abyss: The Indeterminate Fictions of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), xviii.

29. Dayan, *Fables of Mind*, 199, 202.

30. Burke, "I, Eye, Ay," 187. Poe's perverse characters certainly have very little in common with traditional Transcendentalists—in fact, critics have argued that many of them are deliberate parodies of Emersonian philosophy. However, there is one character that does not need to die in order to access greater truths of the dark sublime, and that is Auguste Dupin. Although not a character from Poe's supernatural tales, where perversity is a central feature, I would argue that Dupin also fits this mold of the perverse artist–protagonist. Like Usher and Egaeus, Dupin is able to dissolve into others—but unlike them, he, remarkably, seems to be able to balance his perverse tendencies in order to sustain his own life, using his ability instead to solve crimes that no one else can.

31. Bieganowski, "Self-Consuming Narrator in Poe's 'Ligeia' and 'Usher,'" 176.