

Neither Life Nor Death:
Poe's Aesthetic Transfiguration of Popular Notions of Death
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Heavens! What a moment must that be, when the last flutter expires on our lips! What a change! To what new worlds are we born? What new being do we receive? Whither has that spark, that unseen, that uncomprehended intelligence fled? Look upon the cold, livid, ghastly corpse that lies before you! . . . Then [a] thousand fancies rush upon the mind as it contemplates the awful moment between life and death! It is a moment big with imagination's greatest hopes and fears; - it is the consummation that clears up all mystery – resolves all doubts - which removes contradiction, and destroys error. Great God! What a flood of rapture may at once burst upon the departed soul!

"Reflections on death"¹

These reflections by an unknown author in a popular journal of the early nineteenth century dwell on a fantasy that still retains its fascinating, if paradoxical, quality: to experience the end of experience, to map the untrodden territory of death. And yet, in an almost imperceptible shift of perspective that abandons this train of thought, the author moves from speculative identification with the dying ("[w]hat a moment must that be") to detached perception of the dead body ("look upon the cold, livid, ghastly corpse"). The noncommunicating presence of the dead body seems to fence off once and for all the idea of transgressing the boundary unharmed. When the anonymous author of "Reflections on death" resumes his speculations, however, another shift of perspective effaces the frightening evidence of the corpse and conjures up a vision of ultimate bliss and beauty. Once again he reflects on the subjective experience of death rather than the objective perception of the dead body, yet now he declares "the awful moment between life and death" (my emphasis) to be the focus of his reflections. Indeed, this precarious moment which is neither life nor death might serve as a link between the living and the dead, disclosing death without foreclosing communication.

While "Reflections" only hints at the idea of an intermediate period that is no longer life and not yet death, that period was of primary concern for other writers of the day. In this essay, I will try to lay bare parts of an intricate network of medical, popular, and aesthetic variations on the strange theme of an intermediate state between life and death, a state envisioned as both indeterminate and contained. My focus will be on tales by Edgar Allan Poe, especially the angelic dialogues, "Mesmeric Revelation," and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," that express in an exemplary (yet not exclusive) way the desire to envision a death untainted by pain, destruction, and fear.²

If today Poe's approaches to the extraordinary situation of dying seem purely 'fictional,' their fictionality was considerably less certain in the nineteenth century; indeed, he consciously and deliberately echoes scientific rhetoric in order to blur the boundary between scientific documentation and aesthetic experimentation. Not only the contemporary reception of some of his most lurid tales but also Poe's own - half-contemptuous, half-flattered - reaction to the public's credulity testifies to the efficacy of this strategy.³ His desire to present a scientifically plausible (or even revolutionary) argument conjoins with ambition for philosophical precision and insight, and he transforms both medical and philosophical authorities in the very course of reception, employing a technique that could be called 'refuting by quoting,' which subtly transforms the theories he draws upon by placing them into a new context and providing them with a new subtext. Thus, almost imperceptibly, a strange and originary conglomerate of allusions and distortions evolves in Poe's writing and especially in his reflections upon death. This move can be exemplified in the apparent endorsement of idealist philosophy from which he disassociates himself in the very process of quoting: his texts are replete with idealist concepts, terms, and allusions yet eventually revise idealist models of

thought in a fundamental way.

Idealist and transcendentalist conceptions represented individuality as a fragmentary condition to be depolarized and converted into a higher unity in death, a unity that leaves individual specificity behind. Poe's tales, I argue, do not permit themselves to be read as a quest for this ideal (uncorporealized and unindividualized) unity, although he does evoke the categories of ideal unity and transcendental perfection to describe a postmortem situation. Unlike idealist thinkers such as Hegel and Emerson, however, who regard individual disintegration as a precondition for an ideal metaphysical existence, Poe does not conceive of individualized existence as negative per se and tries time and again to safeguard individuality by declaring it absolute. Insisting on the corporeality of individuality, he seeks to understand death as a corporeal transformation rather than an de-individualizing disintegration.⁴ Thus, his texts evoke the Utopian conception of an existence both individualized and absolute, contained and open. The "moment between life and death," enclosed by absolute boundaries and yet unconcerned with the limitations of life or the distortions of death, will provide scope for Poe's desire.

I. "How gradual is death"

The idea of death as a reversible or relative state has haunted the popular imagination since the sixteenth century. When in the late eighteenth century French physicians defined death as a process rather than a momentary event, they but confirmed the long-established conviction of death as a state appertaining invariably to some last trace of life.⁵ By dint of the momentous statement of the renowned pathologist M. F. X. Bichat that "life is the totality of those functions which resist death,"⁶ death presents itself as a negative determination of life, which strictly speaking commences with being born. Consequently, if death can be conceived of as a gradual extinction of organic life, the functions of life might continue beyond the boundaries of death, disclosing a precarious intermediate state of neither life nor death:

[O]rganic life may to a certain point exist, after animal life is extinct; . . . the latter on the contrary is in such dépendance on the former, that it never endures after its interruption. The individual struck by apoplexy, etc. lives for many hours within, whereas he ceases to exist all at once from without: death commences in this instance, in animal life. . . . You will never find a warm and red blooded animal to live externally, after it has ceased to exist within: so that the cessation of organic phenomena is always a certain indication of general death. We can never indeed pronounce upon its reality until after it has taken place, the interruption of external phenomena being almost always an illusory sign.⁷

The idea of death 'commencing' externally, entrapping life 'within,' is an uncanny one, even if Bichat carefully avoids its most lurid implications by emphasizing the phenomenon's purely unconscious nature.⁸ Yet the frightening aspects of this conception were not lost on the public, as contemporary sensational thematizations of death and dying prove: death might subjectively be experienced as life, for only the physician and often enough not even he, can ascertain its actuality. Thus, next to pseudo-journalistic descriptions of apparent death, postmortem reports of the day increasingly emphasize precisely the reality of the experience of 'the other side.' The anonymous author of an article in *The Casket* of 1837, describing sensationally his 'death' and resuscitation, insists on the correctness of the medical diagnosis that concurrently motivates his personal anxiety and powerlessness:

I knew now well that I had died. . . . Could it be, that though coldness wrapped the suffering clay, passion and sense would soon survive and that while every external trace of life had fled, consciousness could still cling to the cold corpse destined to the earth. . . . Then I thought it might be what is termed a trance, but that poor hope deserted me, as I brought to mind the words of the doctor who knew too well the unerring signs of death to be deceived by its counterfeit. . . . And then I remembered how gradual is death, and how by degrees it creeps over every portion of the frame-like the track of the destroyer, blighting as it goes.⁹

Death, this author holds, may be unproblematically distinguished from its "counterfeit," trance or asphyxia, yet the differentiation depends on the very indeterminacy of a temporalized death, "creeping" rather than destroying once and for all.

By light of such scenarios the physician gains immense importance because he is not only expected to recognize the "unerring signs of death" but moreover to defy death's power by possibly resuscitating the "cold corpse" after all. This importance is acknowledged in medical texts as well, where the physician appears as the only one to probe into the sombre realm between life and death. "Avoid giving a patient over in an acute disease. It is impossible to tell, in such cases, where life ends and where death begins," Benjamin Rush, one of the great founders of American medicine, admonished his students in 1789.¹⁰

More than any other author of the nineteenth century, Poe has been seen to emphasize the traumatic fears released by the popular frenzy concerning apparent death. And as he time and again en-

acts dark fantasies about being buried alive or entertains terrifying speculations about the return of the dead, this estimate doubtlessly holds true. Yet the representation of death as destructive boundary or demoniacal otherness constitutes only part of Poe's approach. Especially his later work is imbued with the notion of death as a 'positive' state, affirming and perfecting self rather than destroying or distorting it once and for all. In most of his quasi-scientific descriptions of dying, he adopts a tone of voice very similar to Bichat's – neglecting the frightful aspects of the notion of death as a gradual transgression in order to concentrate on its potential consequences. Yet, whereas Bichat insists rather coolly on the transitory nature of the situation between life and death, Poe, I argue, tries to render it absolute - for him, the period between life and death becomes the privileged site of the aesthetic. Unlike Bichat, however, Poe eventually will have to face the problematic logical and conceptual implications of an imagery that evokes eternal individual integrity at the cost of personal change, development, and - lastly - communication. Because, when totalized, the popular conception of an 'intermediate state' forecloses the language of subjective experience and (lastly) even fictional representation, Poe will eventually have to turn to the objective and quasi-scientific language of Eureka in order to safeguard the cherished concept once and for all.

II. An Aesthetics of Intermediacy: Between Life and Death

Poe assumes aesthetic experience to be marked by a fundamental discrepancy of the ideal and the real; whereas ideal beauty always exceeds the capacities of fragmentary individual perception and thus cannot completely comply with human understanding, human art creates an effect of the ideal that perfectly corresponds with human perception and hence constitutes perfect aesthetic experience without requiring the transcendence (or loss) of individuality. In the 1847 tale "The Domain of Arnheim," the inherent human failure to perceive and appreciate the aesthetic totality of nature is ascribed to man's "deathful condition," which limits the human perspective to an extent that total vision is impossible. However, "There may be a class of beings," muses Ellison, one of the protagonists of the tale, "for whose death-refined appreciation of the beautiful, may have been set in array by God the wide landscape-gardens of the hemispheres" (Works, 3:1274).¹¹

Of course, this "class of beings" has been introduced into Poe's writing earlier in the angelic dialogues and mesmeric tales, all of which adopt the narrative perspective of an imaginary "death-refined" creature. Partaking of divine immortality, yet obviously still individualized, the angels evoke the precarious balance between the limitations of life and the destructiveness of death, a balance that is eventually identified with the aesthetic *per se*. In turn, this 'angelic' condition of pure aestheticism exhausts itself in the tautological affirmation of individual sensation, eventually losing its transcending or idealizing power altogether, as I will show.

When in "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" Monos declares the faculty of aesthetic pleasure, taste, to be the only adequate instigation for the universal regeneration of human society, he projects the actual effectuation of this regeneration onto death: "for the infected world at large I could anticipate no regeneration save in death." "Death-purged," mankind may lose its defective features (Works, 2:611, 612). While thus true social regeneration is perversely equated with the a-social transformation of death, on another level the aesthetic, which after all pervades this transformation, turns out to be deeply entwined in the "deathful condition."

Whereas death in this tale, just as in "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion," definitely obliterates the perverted social system, it is by no means presented in opposition to individuality or corporeal integrity. Death refines or reorganizes rather than annihilates materiality. Monos celebrates "the redeemed, regenerated, blissful, and now immortal, but still . . . the material, man" (Works, 2:612). In view of this insistence on materiality, Una's careful distinction between "the moment of life's cessation" and "Death" is interesting because it is not, strictly speaking, 'Death' but the "torpor . . . termed Death by those who stood around" that preconditions the fragile balance of immortal ideality and sensuous materiality (2:609, 612). The focus of the tale is thus determined by the contemporary medical and popular notion of an intermediate state between life and death, material and spiritual existence.

Although described as "torpor" from an outside perspective, this intermediate state is subjectively experienced as a totalization of pure sensation at the cost of moral evaluation and rational reflection. This calls into mind Poe's earlier definition of the aesthetic as "excitement, of the soul" or "immortal instinct" (Complete Works, 14:275, 273), which draws on an exclusion of the rational and moral similar to Monos's description of his state of torpor. In "Monos and Una," how-

ever, the all-encompassing quality of the material renders the earlier distinction between "soul" and "body" obsolete, for at this point Poe conceives of "spirit" as "knowable only through matter," as Michael Davitt Bell has shown.¹² Hence the aesthetic excitement of the soul and the sensuous excitement of the body as experienced in the state between life and death tend to merge almost imperceptibly.

The correspondence of the aesthetic, the intermediate, and the corporeal is conspicuous. The sensuous body safeguards personal selfhood, pleasure, and totality, thus repeating and perfecting the effort of the aesthetic to speak nothing but itself.¹³ When Monos cherishes the synesthetic merging of all sensations, he epitomizes the concrete corporeality and self-referentiality of this experience:

The eyelids, transparent and bloodless, offered no complete impediment to vision. As volition was in abeyance, the balls could not roll in their sockets – but all objects within the range of the visual hemisphere were seen with more or less distinctness, the rays which fell upon the external retina, or into the corner of the eye, producing a more vivid effect than those which struck the front or anterior surface. Yet, in the former instance, this effect was so far anomalous that I appreciated it only as sound. . . . Touch had undergone a modification more peculiar. Its impressions were tardily received, but pertinaciously retained, and resulted always in the highest physical pleasure. . . . All my perceptions were purely sensual. (Works, 2:613)

This passage recalls the popular postmortem reports and their emphasis on a strangely detached visual experience in death,¹⁴ yet even more obviously it reflects upon the idea of an "excitability of the system" remaining in the dead body "in some instances for hours afterwards unimpaired," as Benjamin Rush maintained. According to Rush this excitability could be kindled into life by inducing "motion," "sensation," and finally "thought," elements which for him constituted "perfect life in the human body."¹⁵ Likewise in Poe's text, the "sentience" of the body "termed" dead produces sensation, yet the precarious (and voyeuristic) stability of its "motionless torpor" depends exactly on this sensation's not becoming thought (2:612). The situation between life and death, between "rational" and "moral" determination, is fascinating because it discloses a kind of contained indeterminacy. Its absolute (emotional and moral) unconcern constitutes power and voyeuristic centrality in distance. The underlying possibility of reanimation, so central to medical speculations, is consequently ignored completely in Poe's tale – here the utmost realization of sensuous excitement is shown to consist precisely in the maintenance of indeterminacy and self-referentiality.

"But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient."¹⁶ What Poe had long recognized with respect to aesthetic pleasure, he eventually could not deny in the context of death. When the organic body disintegrates, the precarious balance of immortality and materiality collapses, and the loss of body-feeling induces the loss of identity. The moment the body is affected by putrefaction, 'Death' commences for Monos:

The perfume in my nostrils died away. Forms affected my vision no longer. The oppression of the Darkness uplifted itself from my bosom. A dull shock like that of electricity pervaded my frame, and was followed by total loss of the idea of contact. All of what man has termed sense was merged in the sole consciousness of entity, and in the one abiding sentiment of duration. The mortal body had been at length stricken with the hand of the deadly Decay. (Works, 2:615)

The extremely negative impact of decay consists in its attacking the fundamental reference for personal identity: the sensuous body - which after all for Poe has come to displace (or incorporate) 'spirit' and 'soul' as the traditional safeguards of self. In this respect, the passage reflects the medical and popular idea that putrefaction finally is the last definite event in the gradual transformation that death is thought to represent: "The commencement of putrefaction, in ordinary cases, affords the first certain evidence of death," states the Encyclopaedia Americana of 1830,¹⁷ and the British physician James Bower Harrison expresses an almost Poe-like horror in the face of the uncompromising finality of this event:

There is nothing more appalling and humiliating than the decomposition of the dead; ... we may, indeed, persuade ourselves, that the dead are only silent and unmovable, but when changes gradually manifest themselves, and we can no longer recognise the familiar features we have so often looked upon, we see the greatness of that alteration, and feel what it is to die.¹⁸

The irreversible reality of death may have been dislocated by way of the medical assumption of an intermediate state, but the cruel and disgusting fact of putrefaction thereby is emphasized even more as both sign and referent of death. Even if Monos does not speak as a 'disembodied soul' in the end, but incorporates the atmosphere ("The narrow space immediately surrounding what had been the body, was now growing to be the body itself" [Works, 2:616]), the "total loss of the idea of contact" categorically forecloses the "purely sensual pleasure" of the former state (2:614). The

process of dissolution is described as the impact of pure negativity - exploding time and place and leaving - Nothing:

For that which was not - for that which had no form - for that which had no thought - for that which had no sentience - for that which was soulless, yet of which matter formed no portion - for all this nothingness, yet for all this immortality, the grave was still a home, and the corrosive hours, co-mates. (2:617)

The reconciliation of godlike aesthetic pleasure and human selfhood comes to be realized only momentarily, and it presents itself as deeply entrenched in corporeality. For "Monos and Una" at least, Allen Tate's famous characterization of Poe's writing as an effort to represent the "archetypal condition [of] the survival of a soul in a dead body" does not ring true:¹⁹ the survival of the self-identical principle here is shown to be intricately linked to (if not identical with) the sensuous body. The extremely refined 'atmospheric' body in its turn manifests itself exclusively as a negation of personal existence. When Poe three years later returns to the topic of dying, it is exactly the unsettling notion of decay as progression of pure negativity that he sets out to revise.

In "Mesmeric Revelation," once again, Poe projects the idea of a contained indeterminacy onto the experience of the sensuous body. Now, however, the narrative perspective has shifted with considerable consequences: Whereas in the earlier tale Monos talked about the intermediate state from the perspective of the 'Dead,' in this tale Vankirk talks as somebody who is neither alive nor dead, yet his condition serves only as a verification of the representation, not as the Utopian possibility itself which in its turn is further transferred to the "ultimate life."

Like so many of Poe's protagonists, Vankirk is driven by the desire to experience death without suffering destruction. Mesmerized, he manages not only to experience but moreover to communicate the results of this mesmerically produced "self-cognizance" (Works, 3:1032). Yet initially Vankirk's insights are by no means 'original,' to use Poe's own foremost criterion. The imagery of a pantheistic universe that renders individuality and corporeality an arbitrary secondary organization basically draws on philosophical commonplaces of the day. When, however, the interlocutor, 'P,' attempts to sum up Vankirk's system in the logical conclusion "'You say that divested of the body man will be God?,'" he meets with unexpected resistance: "'I could not have said this; it is an absurdity'" (3:1036). Indeed, given the fundamental difference between man (contained individuality) and God (indeterminate totality), their identification would necessarily be an "absurdity." After all, the inevitable loss of individuality would render absolute experience nonsensical, as it discards reference and perspectivity altogether.

Vankirk's determination to think of perfect self-realization as incompatible with individual disintegration is consistent with his distinction between the "rudimental" and the "ultimate body" (Works, 3:1037), which in turn recalls Monos's distinctions between the states "termed Death" and "Death." As in "Monos and Una," Vankirk asserts that corporeal decay brings forth an ultimate rupture in existence, but this time the process of putrefaction is construed as positive:

The matter of which our rudimental body is composed, is within the ken of the organs of that body; or, more distinctly, our rudimental organs are adapted to the matter of which is formed the rudimental body; but not to that of which the ultimate is composed. The ultimate body thus escapes our rudimental senses, and we perceive only the shell which falls, in decaying, from the inner form; not that inner form itself; but this inner form, as well as the shell, is appreciable by those who have already acquired the ultimate life. (3:1037)

Once the idea of ultimate life as purely negative condition gives way to the imagery of an absolute yet nevertheless perfectly individualized existence, the popular notion of putrefaction as demarcation of the end loses ground. In this context, decay turns out to be a process of liberation, releasing the body's ultimate potential instead of destroying it.²⁰ Unlike the vague 'atmospheric' body in "Monos and Una," the ultimate body in "Mesmeric Revelation" is presented as sensuous focus of pure pleasure: "[I]n the ultimate, unorganized life, the external world reaches the whole body. . . the whole body vibrates, setting in motion the unparticled matter which permeates it" (3:1038). The self-referential, indeterminate body between life and death of "Monos and Una" resurfaces here, transferred into the eternal realm of 'Death.' The 'ultimate body' promises the absolute expansion of the 'moment' between life and death, stabilizing the precarious state of contained indeterminacy once and for all.

This shift of emphasis from the precarious body before decay to the ultimate body beyond decay, however, casts a strange light on the actual narrative perspective. After all, Vankirk speaks from a curiously nondescript position: As the actual moment of death is uncertain, he seems to be neither dead nor living during the interview; yet this precarious period between life and death, formerly centralized, now functions but as autho-

rization of the narrative. What Roland Barthes noted about "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" concerns this tale as well: the story dwells on an "empty point," a "blind spot of language."²¹

This position, however, is the nearest one can get to communicating a state of absolute and self-referential pleasure as given in the 'ultimate life.' While Monos's representation from memory nostalgically evokes the transitoriness of the intermediate state, Vankirk promises its eternal presence, yet thereby reduces the intermediate state of the narrative itself to absolute insignificance.

Of course, the inherent negativity of this narrative perspective prefigures the glaring negativity of "The Case of M. Valdemar," where the situation between life and death no longer has any other function than tautologically speaking itself. Valdemar's statement "I say to you that I am dead!" (Works, 3:1242) denotes only the moment of transgression. In this tale, the different states - life, 'intermediacy,' death - and the different processes - living, putrefying, dying - collapse: in the end Valdemar is not only dead but literally gone, leaving behind a "nearly liquid mass of loathsome - of detestable putridity" (3:1243). Where a contemporary reader may very well have accepted the paradoxical condition of "death-life" (Barthes), which after all is an "unheard-of-category" only for modern readers,²² it was Poe's tautological totalization of this condition that must have seemed as utterly frightening then as it does today. As Valdemar refuses to communicate anything but what his body already expresses, the intermediate state - meaningless in itself - comes to displace not only life and death but also the desired sensuality of the 'torpor' of Poe's earlier tales. Like the "cold, livid, ghastly corpse" quoted in "Reflections on death" at the outset of this essay, Valdemar's hideous body forecloses communication. As it insists on holding onto language, however, it eventually brings forth the long-repressed, and terrifying, aspects of the intermediate state.

In "Mesmeric Revelation" of 1844, Poe tries to overcome the problematical conclusions of "Monos and Una" by replacing the unreliable corporeal body with the ultimate body of death. In "The Case of M. Valdemar" of the following year, Poe enacts nothing but the dangerous implications of this replacement, which after all depends on the distinction of a nondescript narrative perspective and a 'message': Vankirk's speaking body is not the body he speaks about, as the envisioned purely sensuous body of death would render communication impossible. The tautological negativity of "The Case of M. Valdemar," then, consists in the collapse of representation and message, as Valdemar's dead body speaks nothing but itself and thus performs communication for its own sake. The shift of focus from factual information to the pure act of speaking demarcates the ultimate unapproachability of a state of contained indeterminacy, a state that - being purely self-referential - can only be recalled (as by Monos) or projected (as by Vankirk). To overcome the inherently mediated quality of this state, Poe will eventually discard the fictional rhetoric of subjective experience altogether, adopting with Eureka a philosophical and scientific meta-language - which forecloses any speculation about the subject of representation and its predicament - so that the state between life and death appears absolutely stable and self-contained after all, untainted by any awareness of its incommunicability or torpid self-referentiality.

The popular notion of an intermediate state between life and death, which provided scope for both Poe's conceptions of aesthetic function and his idea of personal identity, is curiously transformed in Poe's adaptations. Totalized, this state seems to promise absolute pleasure (thus absolute aesthetic experience) and the eternal maintenance of self. Yet totalized it also turns out to be incommunicable. Once the glaring absurdity of a state that speaks nothing but itself becomes obvious in "The Case of M. Valdemar," an approach via subjectivity and (fictional) personal experience collapses. In a last transfiguration of the ideal of intermediacy, Poe adopts another discursive voice, so that in Eureka he develops with scientific (physical) metaphors a seemingly objective process of ratiocination. This turn seems to justify Bichat's hesitation to speculate about the subjective experience of a state that is neither life nor death, but it never shares the latter's assumption of its transitoriness or unconscious quality. In Eureka, as before, the intermediate state is conceived of as a state that safeguards personal (sensuous) self-hood, totalizes aesthetic pleasure, and thus renders death as destructive disintegration impossible. The "feeling that we exist" again signals the ideal state of contained indeterminacy, but in Eureka that state is no longer presented as dependent on the mediation of some privileged, "death-refined" creature, for everybody is shown to be intuitively aware of its truth: "Why we should not exist, is, up to the epoch of our Manhood, of all queries the most unanswerable. Existence - self-existence - existence from all Time and to all Eternity - seems, up to the epoch of Manhood, a normal and unquestionable condition: - seems, because it is."²³

NOTES

- 1 "Reflections on death," *The Casket* 7, no. 5 (1832): 179-80, 179.
- 2 In an interesting approach to Poe's tales of premature burial, J. Gerald Kennedy, too, has correlated medical theories of the early nineteenth century with Poe's writing, reading the tales both as strategic "rehearsal of death" and "literature of survival." J. Gerald Kennedy, "Notes from Underground: Premature Burial," in *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987), 32-59, 58. Yet concentrating on medical thematizations of apparent death and Poe's tales of living entombment, he does not distinguish between the traumatic (though burlesque) descriptions of living entombment and the 'experimental' and strangely painless symbolic enactments of dying as given in the angelic dialogues or "Mesmeric Revelation." Because the very distinction between apparent death - which is frightening - and an intermediate state between life and death - which is pleasurable - runs through medical and sensational texts of the day as well, it is important to cast a closer look on their rhetoric in order to contextualize Poe's system of thought.
- 3 On the reception of some of Poe's tales about mesmerism, see his *Marginalia* 130 and 200 (*Writings*, 2:231, 331-33) and his letter to Arch Ramsay of 30 December 1846 (*Letters*, 2:337). Although Poe often makes a point of emphasizing the pure fictionality of his tales, his letter to the popular mesmerist George Bush of January 1845 reverberates with his fascinated reflection on their (scientific) probability:

I have ventured to send you the article ["Mesmeric Revelation"] because there are many points in it which bear upon the subject-matter of your last admirable work on the Future Condition of Man and therefore I am induced to hope that you will do me the honor to look over what I have said.

You will, of course, understand that the article is purely a fiction; - but I have embodied in it some thoughts which are original with myself & I am exceedingly anxious to learn if they have claim to absolute originality, and also how far they will strike you as well based." (*Letters*, 1:273)

Both Taylor Stoehr and David Reynolds have delineated Poe's deep fascination with (pseudo-)scientific accounts of human nature, death, and transcendence: Taylor Stoehr, "Robert H. Collyer's Technology of the Soul," in *Pseudo-Science and Society in Nineteenth Century America*, ed. A. Wróbel (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1987), 21-45; David Reynolds, "Poe and Popular Irrationalism," in *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 225-48.
- 4 Hence I mean to propose an alternative reading to the manifold approaches that conceive of Poe's mesmeric tales as expressing the urge to overcome individuality and ultimately analogize Poe's position to idealist systems of thought. I argue that integration for Poe is a positive turn only if the 'other' is integrated into the self, whereas he anxiously contests the romantic motif of "integration into the mind/body of God" (Evan Carton). For 'idealist' readings of Poe see E. Carton, "The Terror of Integration, the Terror of Detachment," in *The Rhetoric of American Romance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985) 47-77, 70; John F. Lynen, "The Death of the Present: Edgar Allan Poe," in *The Design of the Present* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), 205-71; Paul John Eakin, "Poe's Sense of an Ending," *American Literature* 45 (1973): 1-22; and Leon Chai, "Poe: The Divine Energeia," in *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987), 273-79.
- 5 About the history of this idea and its obsessive thematizations in literary and scientific texts since the sixteenth century, see Philippe Aries, *L'Homme devant la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 347-99.
- 6 M. F. X. Bichat, *Physiological Researches Upon Life and Deaths* trans. Tobias Watkins, 1st Amer. ed. from 2nd French ed. (Philadelphia: Smith and Maxwell, 1809), 1. Michel Foucault has commented upon the consequences and implications of this new understanding of life that after all renders death the absolute perspective of life. See Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Random House, 1973), 156. See also W. R. Albury, "Heart of Darkness: J. N. Corvisart and the Medicalization of Life," *Historical Reflections* 9, nos. 1/2 (1982): 17-31.
- 7 Bichat, *Physiological Researches Upon Life and Death*, 137.
- 8 For a more detailed analysis of medical thought about death and dying in the late eighteenth century, see Paola Vecchi, "Mort Apparente et procédés de 'ressuscitation' dans la littérature médicale du XVIII^e siècle," *Revue de Synthèse* 3, nos. 113/114 (1984): 142-60.
- 9 "Post Mortem Reflections," *The Casket* 12, no. 3 (March 1837): 117-19, 118.
- 10 Benjamin Rush, "Duties of a Physician: A Closing Lecture to Medical Students" [1789], in *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush*, ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 315; see also 160, 240.
- 11 As Poe in "The Domain of Arnheim" continues to elaborate the idea of art as "intermediate or secondary nature," "one step depressed* from the originary divine design (*Works*, 3:1276), he eventually discards the 'angelic' perception after all. Michael Davitt Bell has shown in detail the various stages of evolution in Poe's conception of the beautiful and the aesthetic. Common to all of these stages is the assumption of some unattainable divine ideality to be represented only in

- effect by the human artist. More and more, however, the ideal vanishes behind the representation, so that ultimately the act of representation displaces the vague concept of spiritual ideality altogether. See Bell, "Imagination, Spirit, and the Language of Romance: Edgar Allan Poe," in *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), 87-125. See also Joan Dayan, "The Poet in the Garden," in *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe's Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 80-132.
- 12 Bell, "Imagination, Spirit, and the Language of Romance," 95. Bell's differentiated analysis emphasizes a strategic peculiarity of Poe's rhetoric which I have called his 'refutation by quotation' - even when evoking the soul or spirituality, Poe's focus is not on a transcendental, uncorporealized, de-sensualized existence, for he subtly materializes these categories as he goes along. Hence the identification of the state between life and death with a theological idea of purgatory necessarily ignores the focal aspect of pure and self-referential bodily pleasure.
- 13 This self-reflective affinity of the aesthetic is the foremost aim in "The Poetic Principle," in which Poe declares "this poem which is a poem and nothing more - this poem written solely for the poem's sake" to be the "poem per se" (Complete Works, 14:272). On Poe's turn to an increasingly self-referential aesthetic, see Judith Sutherland, "Poe: The Captain Regrets ...," in *The Problematic Fictions of Poe, James, and Hawthorne* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1984), 12-37; and Donald Pease, "Edgar A. Poe: The Lost Soul of American Tradition," in *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 158-202.
- 14 Most of the popular reports relish the double-edged quality of a "breathless and motionless torpor," just like the one Poe evokes - voyeuristic pleasure and frightened helplessness go hand in hand, as the following passage may indicate: "Previous to beginning the dissection, he [the doctor] proposed to try on me some galvanic experiments. . . . The second shock threw my eyes open, and the first person I saw was the doctor who had attended me. But still I was dead; I could however, discover among the students the faces of many with whom I was familiar; and when my eyes were opened I heard my name pronounced by several of the students with an accent of awe and compassion" - *The Casket* 1, no. 9 (September 1826): 257-58, 258.
- 15 Rush, "Second Lecture on Animal Life," in *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush*, 160-61.
- 16 "The Poetic Principle" (Complete Works, 14:266).
- 17 "Death," in *Encyclopaedia Americana*, vol. 4, ed. Francis Lieber (Philadelphia: Carey & Lea, 1830), 137.
- 18 James Bower Harrison, *The Medical Aspects of Death* . . . (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1852), 17-20.
- 19 Allen Tate, "Our Cousin, Mr. Poe," in *The Man of Letters in the Modern World: Selected Essays, 1928-1955* (New York, 1955), 136. For an elaboration of Tate's argument in respect to "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," see Eakin, "Poe's Sense of an Ending," 7-8. Like Eakin, I read this tale as Poe's most extreme representation of a "death-refined" character, yet unlike Eakin, I find an extreme shift of narrative perspective that collapses (rather than continues) the perspective of the earlier tales about the un-dead, as will become clear later in this analysis.
- 20 The emphasis on absolute power and godlike experience anticipates Poe's handwritten note to Eureka that dissolves the conflicting categories of the absolute and the individual by declaring God to be Self: "The pain of the consideration that we shall lose our individual identity, ceases at once when we further reflect that the process, as above described, is, neither more nor less than that of absorption, by each individual intelligence, of all other intelligences (that is, of the Universe) into its own. That God may be all in all, each must become God" - "Poe's Notes to Eureka" (Complete Works, 16:336). In this passage, as in many earlier ones, Poe not only manages to maintain the idea of 'individual' existence within totality, he moreover renders it absolutely stable - nothing remains except "individual intelligence."
- 21 Roland Barthes, "Textual Analysis: Poe's 'Valdemar,'" trans. G. Bennington, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (New York: Longman, 1989), 190; for an alternative translation of this essay, see Barthes, "Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Poe," trans. Donald Marshall, *Poe Studies* 10 (1977): 1-12.
- 22 Barthes, "Textual Analysis," 190. Of course, Barthes's admirable structuralist analysis of the text claims not to be concerned with historical data. His very insistence on discursive structures within the text, however, implies a possible extension of the textual analysis. After all, in light of medical conceptions of Poe's day, central textual categories (e.g., "life-death") appear considerably altered relative to their modern equivalents.
- 23 Poe, Eureka, in *Complete Works*, 16:312; text for this citation to Eureka may be more conveniently available in *The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe* ed. Harold Beaver (London: Penguin Classics, 1976), 307.