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Joan C. Dayan  
*Yale University*

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THE ROAD TO LANDOR'S COTTAGE:  
POE'S LANDSCAPE OF EFFECT

JOAN DAYAN

YALE UNIVERSITY

The principles of the poetic sentiment lie deep within the immortal nature of man, and have little necessary reference to the worldly circumstances around him. The poet in Arcady, is in Kamschataka, the poet still.

Poe, "American Poetry"

I

William Carlos Williams distinguishes the surfaces from the depths of Poe's language: "Poe was NOT, it must be repeated, a Macabre genius, *essentially* lost upon the grotesque and the arabesque. If we have appraised him a morass of 'lolling lilies,' *that* is surface only."<sup>1</sup> One difficulty in reading Poe results from his exaggerated attention to those very surfaces Williams urges us beyond.

In "Landor's Cottage," one of his final experiments in prose, published four months before his death in 1849, Poe places himself as artificer at the limits of language. He is reported to have said to Sarah Helen Whitman that "he intended writing a pendant to 'The Domain of Arnheim' in which the most charming effects should be attained by artistic combinations of familiar and unvalued materials."<sup>2</sup> More than the idyllic word-painting he claims it to be, "Landor's Cottage," in its formal display, records a properly verbal expression of Poe's poetic idea.

Critics have given slight attention to "Landor's Cottage," a significant disregard, since this tale, perhaps more than any other, points to the massive reconstruction of language envisioned by Poe. If it has been dismissed as either an overwritten and not very enchanting landscape description or as an opportunist journalistic enterprise, such is the result of failing to see Poe's delight in making his grammatical faults expressive, letting "the real business of composition show." In his own words about the composition of "The Raven," he is "letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view...."<sup>3</sup> Poe deliberately crafts the means to bring about his celebrated "unity of effect." Condemned by a host of

critics—most notably, T. S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, Ivor Winters and Harry Levin—for, among other features, his verbal excess and childish display of, in Levin's words: "gallicisms...sham erudition, scientific pretensions, quotations from occult authorities, and misquotations from foreign languages,"<sup>4</sup> Poe's real aim has been consistently misunderstood. The point of his tale-writing, what he calls "the predetermined end," "the preconceived effect" or "perfection of plot," must be discussed in terms of those very things long argued as his defects, "excess of capitals, italics, dashes ... exclamation points ... superlatives ... intensives and ineffables," to cite Levin once again.<sup>5</sup> What, then, is Poe's desired end? What does he, as artist, or more precisely, as "constructor," hope to achieve? More than his oft-repeated quest for "supernal Beauty" (probably his aesthetic cover for the underlying emphasis on a rigorous method), I contend that the problem Poe confronts, from his supernatural tales to the final landscape sketches, is the founding of a new ground for fiction. The success of this attempt lies in his conversion of the *donnés* supplied by conventional grammar and picturesque assumptions, and, finally, in his transformation of his own antecedent compositions.

In "Landor's Cottage," a tale of "natural" description, Poe dissimulates discursive devices that signify their own processes to the point of parody. Playfully turning a series of obvious observations into parts of a rhetorical *tour de force*, Poe yet communicates a seriousness of intent, his desired "undercurrent, however indefinite of meaning." That this meaning remain difficult to grasp, that it be kept undetermined and far from obvious, is crucial to Poe's fiction and the key to his theory, his "philosophy of composition." "Landor's Cottage" exemplifies concerns similar to those of Poe's earlier landscape sketches: the writer as conscious colorist, formulating his reactions through a pictorial vocabulary; a landscape framed *as if* a picture; a delight in tracing the landscape's formal patterns to lead the eye, to strike the imagination. Its final effect, however, is different; its tone is playful, its motive artfully deceptive.<sup>6</sup> Instead of a river journey to the phantom "handiwork" of "Arnheim," or through the "Universe of Stars" to the "*utmost conceivable expanse of space*" in *Eureka*, we follow here an overland hike, a "saunter" that suggests a Thoreau turned Southern ironist: "At all events, with my knapsack for a pillow, and my hound as a sentry, a bivouac in the open air was just the thing which would have amused me. I sauntered on, therefore, quite at my ease—Ponto taking charge of my gun...."<sup>7</sup> Poe chooses for subject a

"little domain" (1334), apparently the familiar approach through the Hudson River Valley to his own Fordham Cottage. How he turns the most familiar subject into an enigma will be one of the questions I attempt to answer.

Through its incongruities and distortions of sense, the tale demonstrates Poe's method. Read in the context of his other stories, its new twists become more striking: using the dark and serpentine paths, the endless windings of his typical landscapes, and presenting the promise of enclosure in a tightly wreathed nature, Poe skillfully defeats the series of expectations he has set forth. A failure to communicate what we have been led to expect suggests no failure in his art, but rather proves the presence of a self-conscious inventor whose product results from an excess of art. Maintaining aesthetic detachment, he mimics his composition with a demand for words as figures that obscure straightforward exposition.

He leaves us, nevertheless, with a rather strange and disturbing spectacle: language itself, through its verbal and graphic turns, becomes the protagonist, the cause for anxiety and the destroyer of meaning. Instead of building to a climax, the tale winds down to an apparent collapse of dramatic possibility. Caprice predominates as the writer in the guise of an objective observer ("Having come mainly to observe," 1339), enfeebles the promised embodiment of vision and undermines his claim "to do no more than give, in detail, a picture of Mr. Landor's residence—as I found it" (1340). As we shall see, this last sentence of the tale provides at once the ultimate anti-climax and the most singular effect. Nothing has really happened—only the gradual obliteration of every expectation the reader coming to a Poe tale would have expected to find.

## II

An unnamed narrator begins the tale with memories of having been lost on a winding road that seems the familiar site of many other reported hikes through the Hudson River Valley. Introducing those meanderings typical to a picturesque scene, he presents himself as unique observer and reporter. His observations, related with insouciant prolixity, give doubt full play:

During a pedestrian tour last summer, through one or two of the river counties of New York, I found myself, as the day declined, somewhat embarrassed about the road I was pursuing. The land

undulated very remarkably; and my path, for the last hour, had wound about and about so confusedly, in its effort to keep in the valleys, that I no longer knew in what direction lay the sweet village of B—, where I had determined to stop for the night (1328).

This irresoluteness alerts us to a more fundamental confusion which, in the course of his narration, will weaken any attempt at direct presentation. Stylistic peculiarities manipulate concrete landscape facts into a more abstract order, as things seen become accessories to a more personal, conceptual vision, the "corrected" instruments of a forceful recreation.

Poe uses language explicitly to articulate words written in the process of both forming and defying connections. Through a play of words driven away from the things they represent, Poe constructs a "world of words,"<sup>8</sup> as he delineates for the reader his step-by-step building up of imprecision. The narrative voice of indifference, of nearly comic inexactness, makes descriptive strategies inconsequential. An emphatic unconcern continues to distinguish the technique of indirection in "Landor's Cottage": "A smoky mist, resembling that of the Indian summer, enveloped all things, and, of course, added to my uncertainty. Not that I cared much about the matter" (1328). This neutrality, wherein nothing really makes any difference, perplexes. The plain-talking wanderer does not know where he is; as he accommodates his language to his spatial disorientation, he confuses our comprehension. His "loss of direction" and his admission to the reader in the midst of narration, "What to make of all this, of course I knew not" (1329), becomes the essential complement to this reading. Each condition wavers; not definitely possessing either of two opposite qualities, random specifications cancel one another, and a clear picture of reality is dissolved. Examples of this vagueness, this exploitation of "mere" words, follow:

...through one or two...before sunset, or even before dark...overgrown undergrowth...somewhat more abruptly...a building of some kind...the sun was about descending...Suddenly, therefore...reflected more or less upon all objects...varied from fifty to one hundred and fifty, or perhaps two hundred...a height of some ninety feet...more or less high...scarcely less beautiful, although infinitely less majestic...with more than Arabian perfumes...little more space than just enough...here and there...each and all...more or less precipitous...only here and there...almost entirely clothed...a peninsula which was *very* nearly an island...I mean, merely...and I do *not* mean...The point of view...was not *alto-*

*gether*, although it was nearly...to one or two...I did not remain very long...although long enough.

Through such pronounced contrivances, a kind of Lockean critique of popular overuse, words are made to fail.<sup>9</sup> Poe thus drives a wedge between the world observed and the language used to present the scene by setting up a suspension within the phrase, a hiatus wrought through these alternative precisions and nearly obsessive clarifications. To "design but to suggest," the pursuit of *Eureka's* prophet/poet, demands a position in suspense between extremes and the concomitant activation of words in their state of mere-ness. If words are counterfeit, deceiving us into thinking that we have succeeded where we have not, that we can know those shadowy processes "beyond the utterance of the human tongue,"<sup>10</sup> Poe here demonstrates that words are indeed "vague things."<sup>11</sup> In *Eureka* he correlated cogitation to linguistic display. Announcing the very bounds of thought as his subject, "a shadowy and fluctuating domain, now shrinking, now swelling, with the vacillating energies of the imagination," he employed a particular language to point to that realm, "displaying our ignorance of its awful character in the vacillation of the phraseology with which we endeavor to circumscribe it."<sup>12</sup>

Now, the road to Mr. Landor's cottage is quite distinct from *Eureka's* "utmost conceivable expanse of space," but therein lies its novelty. That the verbal play remains within the alleged intent to depict scenes in a conventional manner adds to the desired effect. To de-particularize a blatantly phenomenal world, Poe mimes a tentativeness and thrusts his words into an alternating movement back and forth between opposing determinations. This protracted in-betweenness undermines the typical Poe narrator's consistent and zealously guarded "particularizing manner."<sup>13</sup> One of the best ways to produce ambiguity is to keep trying to communicate, or at least to give the appearance of such an attempt. The teller draws attention to his descriptive language again and again: "thus *gradually* as I describe it" (1330); "as I have mentioned"; "One of these I have already spoken of"; "as I have already described" (1334); "I have described the brook"; "Its two *general* directions, as I have said"; "I will therefore describe it" (1335). Every registration of the landscape is interrupted by this shaping presence who, by referring to a previous act of depiction, or promising a clarification to come, appears to reestablish the narrator's commitment to exact and verifiable representation.

The concern with accuracy of representation, although making

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his narrative more indistinct, yet forces our attention from vision to craftsmanship. In asking us to "conceive," to get an "idea of the picture" he wants to convey, Poe circumscribes the setting to be transformed. What strikes us is his written encounter with a landscape—a specific subject housed in a highly unspecific style. The "pedestrian tour" (1328) elicits the play of mind that turns the reader into a thinker as well as spectator. A well-executed indefiniteness in engaging the attention of the reflective judgment can result in a certain, desired disposition of the "soul" as it moves to comprehend. Edmund Burke's emphasis on poetry, chosen as an art superior to painting, depended on such a move away from description, "merely as naked description," toward verbal obscurity.<sup>14</sup> The disposition of objects in language can determine the potentially undesigned and so affect the imagination to a greater degree than a painting. Finally, Poe's surface allegiance to the real and the local (what a painter might depict), is subsumed by a diction that inhibits a clear "tracing" of the scene.

As he moves through the countryside, the narrator experiences difficulty in deciding "whether the numerous little glades that led hither and thither were intended to be paths at all." He leaves this doubt unresolved, and, following "one of the most promising of them," he comes upon what he calls "an unquestionable carriage-track." The designation is soon subverted by his further attempts to portray this road. "The road, however, except in being open through the wood—if wood be not too weighty a name for such an assemblage of light trees—and except in the particulars of evident wheel-tracks—bore no resemblance to any road I had before seen" (1329). Here Poe methodically derealizes the object of his perception. The equivocal terms of this sentence and the dash that punctuates it frustrate our desire to visualize a road that opens into the yet more problematic gathering of "light trees," given, the narrator further qualifies, the perhaps "too weighty" name of "wood." What began as clearly unquestionable turns out to be indescribable, while the most precise terms are rendered imprecise.

In terms of a typical Poe tale, this road never before seen would signal an approach toward something sinister or at least unknowable. Instead, the "explorer" enters a plush and "pleasantly moist surface of—what looked more like green Genoese velvet than anything else" (1329). In displacing our anticipation of horror to a recognition of the banal, Poe proves his purpose. His spurious concern with accuracy of representation and his subsequent undoing of the reader's expecta-

tions force an awareness of the poverty of language: what first seemed to promise radical disclosure falls into rhetorical commonplace. In "Landor's Cottage" Poe enfeebles not only established picturesque description but his own antecedent prose efforts. Williams hints the reason in what I take to be the central moment in Poe criticism:

His concern, the apex of his immaculate attack, was to detach a "method" from the smear of common usage....He struck to lay low the "*niaiseries*" of form and content with which his world abounded. It was a machine-gun fire; even in the slaughter of banality he rises to a merciless distinction....He sought by stress upon construction....It is the very sense of a beginning, as it is the impulse which drove him to the character of all his tales; to get from sentiment to form, a backstroke from the swarming "population."<sup>15</sup>

The sometimes brazen linguistic maneuvers of "Landor's Cottage" convert a typical landscape sketch into Poe's discourse on method. In recognizing the arbitrary nature of naming (of using any one term to describe a scene), Poe sabotages his conventional atmosphere of amaze to manifest his singular end — a visual articulation of doubt.<sup>16</sup> The idea of ambivalence is figured in the Poeian dash. Through this graphic device, he finds a way to subvert mere quaint description and thereby physicalizes his own language of approximation. As words become distinct figures in their process of combination, the sentence itself is atomized. Held asunder by this punctuation, these visible units of composition turn into signposts along the road to revelation.

The use of the dash as iconic equivalent for the unsaid manipulates the reader's way of seeing. Situated at a point of tension between description and invention, held as hovering, Poe's method depends, finally, not on a reality external to itself; it is implicit in the telling by the craftsman who manipulates our perception, and hence our understanding, on the perimeter of the domain. The progression of the journey down this circuitous road, presented through successive scenes or views, parallels the technique of tending - toward. What becomes clear as we read through this landscape is that, for Poe, conception moves in tandem with perception. He asks us to conceive; he challenges us to conjure an image as he leads us through a series of graduated steps toward vision.<sup>17</sup> The sentence structure — a syntactic semblance of overreaching — thus articulates the mind's act of perception. This pendant and unsettled terrain of words builds up a succes-



sion of disparate objects of sense: "As it came fully into view—thus gradually as I describe it—piece by piece, here a tree, there a glimpse of water, and here again the summit of a chimney..." (1330).

Throughout the journey, roads succeed upon roads; they wind through vales and eminences, elevations and descents more or less high. Adapting his style to the vacillations of the site, the narrator gives us a motley scene, composed of oddly placed dashes, misused italics, as well as excessive measures, numbers and shapes, which distort rather than reproduce. Each attempt to specify, to impose limits on his conception, or, more precisely, "to bring the matter more distinctly before the eye of the Mind,"<sup>18</sup> undetermines rather than delimits. I cite a rather long descriptive passage, whose technical play strains language to the most extreme verisimilitude and thus realizes the potential of words not to say:

The little vale into which I thus peered down from under the fog-canopy, could not have been more than four hundred yards long; while in breadth it varied from fifty to one hundred and fifty, or perhaps two hundred. It was most narrow at its northern extremity, opening out as it tended southwardly, but with no very precise regularity....The slopes which *encompassed* the vale could not fairly be called hills, unless at their northern face. Here a precipitous ledge of granite arose to a height of some ninety feet; and, as I have mentioned, the valley at this point was not more than fifty feet wide; but as the visiter proceeded southwardly from this cliff, he found on his right hand and on his left, declivities at once less high, less precipitous, and less rocky. All, in a word, sloped and softened to the south; and yet the whole vale was engirdled by eminences, more or less high, except at two points. One of these I have already spoken of.... Here, generally, the slopes were nothing more than gentle inclinations, extending from east to west about one hundred and fifty yards.... As regards vegetation, as well as in respect to everything else, the scene *softened and sloped* to the south. (1331-32).

At best, his application of commonplace to a non-verbal experience remains equivocal. Not knowing how a slope could be called a hill only at its northern face, why a hill has been distinguished from a slope, a slope from an eminence, these series of appellations amount to no more than successive approximations that defy definition. This resistance to specificity affects us most through the narrator's accentuation of his efforts at depicting. He describes a ledge, measures a prescribed point in the valley, which, he says, "I have mentioned." He has not. Nor has he "already spoken of" one of the points where eminences,

neither high nor low, circumscribe the valley. Each time he qualifies a designation, we look for the promised clarification, only to read a passage that in miming representation proves itself fantasy.

Imposing limits to his expression and reiterating these reservations, he begins to hint at the indescribable in words. Both tautology and contradiction operate in this passage. Statements are restricted and decomposed (by such shifters as "while," "or," "but," "unless," "yet," "except") and then simultaneously made all-inclusive. Poe renders the peculiar and abrupt changeableness-in-concord of the picturesque, for example, through a design both broken and circular. We note the markers for wholeness, the conversion of linearity—the road or path—into the round. The notion of being "encompassed" and "engirdled" recalls the poet's perfect domain, Poe's measured sublime: "that evergreen and radiant Paradise which the true poet knows, and knows alone, as the limited realm of his authority—as the circumscribed Eden of his dreams."<sup>19</sup> The tendency toward infolding results in other terms for wholeness, strengthened through repetition: "All, in a word, sloped and softened to the south"; "... the whole vale"; "generally"; "... as well as in respect to everything else, the scene *softened and sloped* to the south." Poe thus gives us configuration instead of impressionist haze and shows how marvels can become materially credible instead of ideal.

### III

The landscape into which we enter, a realm of "no very precise regularity" and ever-increasing generalization, is presented by a narrator who ostensibly depends upon an entire aesthetic tradition for his framework.<sup>20</sup> He wants us to be aware that he knows the theories and composes his landscape accordingly. Thus, he describes a spot whose "capabilities" have been realized: "Not a single impediment lay in the wheel-route—not even a chip or dead twig. The stones that once obstructed the way had been carefully *placed*—not thrown—along the sides of the lane, so as to define its boundaries at bottom with a kind of half-precise, half-negligent, and wholly picturesque definition" (1329). The indefinite definition characteristic of the picturesque eye motivates this portrayal. Ruminating on the scene, a composite of contrasts, he first points out: "all that seemed to have been done, might have been done *here*—with such natural 'capabilities' (as they have it in books on Landscape Gardening)—with very little labor and

expense." And his consideration that "all roads, in the ordinary sense, are works of art" accords with Gilpin's remarks on his Wye tour: "The picturesque eye also, in quest of beauty, finds it in almost every incident, and under every appearance of nature. Her works, and all her works, must ever, in some degree, be beautiful."<sup>21</sup> And yet, our narrator's idea of beauty is far more exclusive and not "ordinary" in any sense. During his trek, he not only surveys scenes along the road, but presents this tour, his chosen line of passage, as a formal trend: "It was a piece of 'composition,' in which the most fastidiously critical taste could scarcely have suggested an emendation" (1330).

The true function of the picturesque, as Poe uses it here, is to legitimate his linguistic invention. As the picturesque executes the passage between contradictions and maintains its fluctuations to evoke the unexpected and sustain the equivocal, Poe turns the expected touches of the picturesque (the contrived bounds of his narrative endeavor) into a novel medium. Although the technicalities of painting and gardening initially control his vision, the word's vicissitudes become the predominant thing shown. Thus, picturesque jargon becomes pretext for what must finally transcend it, just as in *Eureka*, a scientific idiom persuades us to apprehend more than the proofs and demonstrations of science. We might see Poe's adaptation of familiar aesthetic theory as a covert reinforcement of his own prose texture (its bewildering variations and identities, its conflation of opposites, and of course, the bold application of the dash). In other words, if the picturesque involves us in a direct, active relationship with the natural scenery through which we travel, anticipating, examining and recreating what we see; the grounding of suspense in language calls up the pleasures of a critical and comprehensive contemplation.<sup>22</sup>

In thus reading the tale, we become aware of the subtle correlation between what the writer knows of "picturesqueness" and what he makes of what he knows. Sitting down on "one of the blossomy stones," the observer "gazes up and down this fairy-like avenue for half an hour or more in bewildered admiration" (1330). Then he distinguishes himself from those popular and more conventional seekers after the picturesque. All nature's products do not in themselves excite his admiration. Instead, the more elusive "*character of the art*" strikes him: the fact that "an artist, and one with a most scrupulous eye for form, had superintended all these arrangements" (1330). He thus challenges the basic assumptions of current gardenist technique while dispensing with the romanticizers of nature. His imagined

artist favors the artificial over the natural style. Improving nature through rigorous composition, he chooses a designed nature, poised between extremes: "The greatest care had been taken to preserve a due medium between the neat and graceful on the one hand, and the *pittoresque*, in the true sense of the Italian term, on the other.... Everywhere was variety in uniformity" (1330). If sublimity fosters the uniformity of a single, striking effect, the picturesque "thrives on varied particulars. It can be light and playful and unlike the sublime, it can mix with and improve the beautiful."<sup>23</sup> The narrator's attempt to present accurately the "character" of the scene, its *genius loci*, demands a technique held in balance between minuteness of detail and absolute generalization. Confronted by the interdependency of variety and uniformity, he articulates irresolution and renders not a specific scene or locale, but rather a "feeling" of process, the essence of which is combination.

This capacity to combine relates to the "compound faculty," the central invention of the picturesque.<sup>24</sup> Human creativity is limited to making the combinations of material forms, of "the most combinable things hitherto uncombined; the compound as a general rule, partaking (in character) of sublimity or beauty, in the ratio of the respective sublimity or beauty of the things combined."<sup>25</sup> In "The Domain of Arnheim," written three years before "Landor's Cottage," Poe demonstrates how God's designs can be realized in the very substance of the material world. Ellison, his blessed poetician of landscape, explains that the landscape garden fulfills "the poetic sentiment in man." His observations of nature's defects and of the artist's function to compose and correct ("no such combination of scenery exists in nature as the painter of genius may produce").<sup>26</sup> comes from the perspective of one who refuses to rely on the seen and its imitation. To "compose" a landscape and thus bring out its "capabilities" involves modifying material elements in accord with a more perfect design.

#### IV

The writer of "Landor's Cottage" composes what he sees into art, and involves us in the total impression. He describes the sharp and sudden vacillations of the picturesque ground and alludes to Downing's *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, only to point again to his own artifact as singular. If Downing doubts that "Landscape Gardening," being "an imitation of nature," can be

“attempted on so large a scale as to be capable of the same extended harmony and variety of expression,”<sup>27</sup> Poe will place Downing’s formulations in a larger frame, relative to the imagined synthesis of this tale that everywhere converts nature into art.

Landscape, its extent and diversity, has value as matter to be transformed through all the possibilities of linguistic illusion and invention. A natural spectacle changed into artistic emblem, the work itself accords with the context of a corrected nature. The scene never loses its quality of thingness: “Its character did not undergo any material change” (1330). Its marvelous changes can be presented only in terms of art, through a technical magic of shifting scenes. What we might see as the “as if” quality of the landscape, the rhetoric of a world remade, reveals itself in the kinds of figures the narrator evokes to communicate his experience. I sense that this experience of conversion turns on the suspense between nature and the supernal. The hypothetical “as if,” remains Poe’s strategy for keeping the two realms disparate but interchangeable as substitute modes.<sup>28</sup> A continual transfer or “convertibility” of terms and phrases qualifies the language used. As he proceeds on the journey, the views build as “ingenious illusions” or “vanishing pictures,” dramatic spectacle or polished mirror. To cite one example: “By the time...the fog had thoroughly disappeared, the sun had made its way down behind the gentle hills, and thence, as if with a slight *chassez* to the south, had come again fully into sight.... Suddenly, therefore—and as if by the hand of magic—this whole valley and everything in it became brilliantly visible” (1330-31). The strategically placed “as if” brings before the reader the oscillating movement between representation and enchantment, while enforcing Poe’s own definition of art: “I should call it the reproduction of what the senses perceive in nature through the veil of the soul.”<sup>29</sup> In keeping his delineations undetermined, though still physical and visible, he forces our seeing *through* things.

The world of landscape gardening yields here to ritual. This fanciful nature unfolds as a carefully staged ceremonial of accumulated veilings; the reference to the popular “dissolving views”<sup>30</sup> comments on the narrator’s own ingenuity in translating words into “effect.” Poe’s tricks of illusion, his adroitness in deception, mimic an art of *trompe l’oeil*. The following description exemplifies such gradual derealization, what Coleridge named the “material sublime”:

The first *coup d’oeil*, as the sun slid into the position described, impressed me very much as I have been impressed when a boy, by

the concluding scene of some well-arranged theatrical spectacle or melodrama. Not even the monstrosity of color was wanting; for the sunlight came out through the chasm, tinted all orange and purple; while the vivid green of the grass in the valley was reflected more or less upon all objects, from the curtain of vapor that still hung overhead as if loth to take its total departure from a scene so enchantingly beautiful (1331).

In this landscape the sunlight enacts a spectacle of illumination, causing the "monstrosity of color" that sets up Poe's equation between the beautiful and the strange.

This novel creation, suffused with light, appears as a mirage, through which we perceive an earth in disguise. The narrator's denaturation of natural elements converts observed elements into words. In the subsequent pictorialization, vegetation becomes luxurious, exotic and perfumed; multicolored flowers and all kinds of trees gain sentience.<sup>31</sup> Through a hyperbolic, overly ornamented style, he encases a living object in the written word, as words themselves become subject of incantation. By deliberately using a tulip tree's correct Latin name, "It was a triple stemmed tulip-tree—the *Liriodendron Tulipiferum*—one of the natural order of magnolias," he names, and thus elevates the common tree into diction. The implication is that any act of nomination holds the possibility of transmuting the real into fiction. And continuing to accentuate artifice, he explains: "Nothing can surpass in beauty the form, or the glossy, vivid green of the leaves of the tulip tree...they were full eight inches wide; but their glory was altogether eclipsed by the gorgeous splendor of the profuse blossoms." Then, with an exclamation, he brings the fantastic object before our eyes: "Conceive, closely congregated, a million of the largest and most resplendent tulips! Only thus can the reader get any idea of the picture I would convey.... The innumerable blossoms, mingling with those of other trees scarcely less beautiful, although infinitely less majestic, filled the valley with more than Arabian perfumes" (1333). Here, the setting attains to extravagance from specifications of the immeasurable within a space defined as a picture. His earlier reference to "vanishing pictures" confirms the use of words as a sequence in dissolution: instead of incommunicable grandeur, the narrator again undermines his own string of superlatives with the vague comedown, "scarcely less beautiful, although infinitely less majestic...more than Arabian perfumes." And within this valley, a "grass...deliciously soft, thick, velvety, and miraculously green" cov-

ers the earth. Having successfully reconstructed a trivialized nature, the narrator writes: "It was hard to conceive how all this beauty had been attained."

As he approaches his destination, Landor's cottage, the minute discrimination of things seen releases effects that continue to inhibit our imaging the setting. As before, vagueness functions in conjunction with directness, and the combination engenders a very precise atmosphere of illusion. All blends perceptibly into enigma, "a definiteness of vague and therefore of spiritual effect." The rivulet's crystalline waters ("No crystal could be clearer than its waters") are bounded by banks of "emerald grass," and these banks "rounded; rather than sloped, off into the clear heaven below; and so clear was this heaven, so perfectly, at times, did it reflect all objects above it, that where the true bank ended and where the mimic one commenced, it was a point of no little difficulty to determine." The bank (initially an indication of bounds), ends up signifying the unfathomable, as it reflects its image both real and spurious, joining "true bank" to "mimic one." At the watery site, the narrator sees further oddities: "The trout, and some other varieties of fish, with which this pond seemed to be almost inconveniently crowded, had all the appearances of veritable flying-fish. It was almost impossible to believe that they were not absolutely suspended in the air" (1333). This grotesque picture of crowding fish that appear finally to fly reminds us of those countless tulips amassed within the thick-scented valley. By substituting Ligeia's abundant hair or the excessively white and numerous teeth of Berenice for these initially common landscape elements, we see how consistently Poe imposes his method onto nature, as Williams writes, "to find a way to tell his soul."<sup>32</sup>

Upon reaching the cottage, he refuses to categorize his observation. He observes that "this house, like the infernal terrace seen by Vathek, *"était d'une architecture inconnue dans les annales de la terre,"* but then debunks this too obviously "romantic" idea. Instead of offering a grand opening out into a visionary Cave of Eblis, he qualifies: "I mean, merely, that its *tout ensemble* struck me with the keenest sense of combined novelty and propriety—in a word, of poetry—(for, than, in the words just employed, I could scarcely give, of poetry in the abstract, a more rigorous definition)—and I do *not* mean that the merely *outré* was perceptible in any respect" (1335). And here we have the aim of his landscape sketch. The combinatorial power of his words gives a "rigorous definition" of a whole whose effect remains indefi-

nite, whose modulations are suggested, rather than expressed. On the other hand, the word "outré" that appears to be Poe's favored signal for the bizarre, becomes an empty cliché, one of the mere words. And following the minutely detailed description of Mr. Landor's cottage (nearly five pages which we shall not discuss, very similar in structure to "The Philosophy of Furniture"<sup>33</sup>), he terminates the narrative with a one-sentence paragraph: "It is not the purpose of this work to do more than give, in detail, a picture of Mr. Landor's residence—as I found it" (1340).

An abrupt termination to what seemed to be an endless series of measures, colors and forms joining to construct a picture or decompose a vision, the narrator leaves us with his final invention. True, he has described the "marvellous effect" of the cottage as dependent upon "its artistic arrangement as a *picture*," emphasizing: "I could have fancied, while I looked at it, that some eminent landscape-painter had built it with his brush" (1335). Yet, despite seeming deference to a picturesque tableau, the last sentence sounds a false note. The narration of the road has progressed through combinations of the phenomenal world and what we can know, to hint at the inconceivable. Its final effect suggests a verbal slight of hand that defies the declared intent to present "a picture." This claim leaves us with a story without a plot: all possible content has been projected as form. Freed from the representational imperative through a method of inventive particularization ("a rigorous definition" of "poetry in the abstract"), Poe might have more honestly written, "*—as I feigned it.*"

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York, 1933), pp. 218-219.

<sup>2</sup> See *M*, 3:1326, where Mabbott refers us to the letter of Mrs. Whitman to George W. Eveleth, 15 December 1864.

<sup>3</sup> *H*, 14:194-195.

<sup>4</sup> Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville*. (New York, 1956), pp. 133-135, cited in G. R. Thompson, *Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales* (Madison, WI, 1973), p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Poe's comic technique and talent for mimicry, even to the point of miming his own rhetorical devices, results in the well-known condemna-



tions of verbal vulgarity and primitivism. These playful distortions of conventional prose subvert moral content to form, and, more precisely, to his craftsmanship. As Poe admits in his Preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*: "I think it best becomes me to say, therefore, that if I have sinned, I have deliberately sinned." For excellent studies of Poe's "burlesque technique," see G. R. Thompson (cited above) and Terrence Martin, "The Imagination at Play," *KR*, 28 (1966), 194-209.

<sup>7</sup> I rely here on *M*, 3: 1329. Further references to "Landor's Cottage" are by line number, within the text.

<sup>8</sup> See "Al Aaraaf," *M*, 1:104, ll.124-127:

A sound of silence on the startled ear  
Which dreamy poets name "the music of the sphere."  
Ours is a world of words: Quiet we call  
"Silence"—which is the merest word of all.

<sup>9</sup> Speaking of the composition of "The Raven," Poe confesses his need to empty words of denotative content: "Had I been able, in the subsequent composition, to construct more vigorous stanzas, I would without scruple, have purposely enfeebled them, so as not to interfere with the climacteric effect." See "The Philosophy of Composition"—*H*, 14:203.

<sup>10</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Eureka: A Prose Poem*, ed. Richard P. Benton (Hartford, 1973), p. 20. This most recent edition of the essay contains line numbers, explanatory essay, and bibliographical guide.

<sup>11</sup> "The Colloquy of Monos and Una"—*M*, 2:612. If, as in "Tamerlane," the poet has "no words—alas!—to tell," Poe dramatizes the fall into formlessness before what outstrips his imaging powers: "The Letters—with their meaning—melt/To fantasies—with none"—*M*, 1:29, ll. 88-89.

<sup>12</sup> *Eureka*, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> "A Descent into the Maelstrom"—*M*, 2:578.

<sup>14</sup> In Burke's opinion, poetry has a greater effect on the imagination than painterly imitation, primarily because it can maintain tension between the boundless and our perception of bounds: "But let it be considered, that hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea." *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* [1757], ed. James T. Boulton, ed. (London, 1958), Part I, Sect. IV, p. 89.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *In the American Grain*, p. 221.

<sup>16</sup> In "The Domain of Arnheim," Ellison, poet of the landscape, is quoted as saying: "What is said about detecting and bringing into practice nice relations of size, proportion, and color, is one of those mere vaguenesses of speech which serve to veil inaccuracy of thought" (p. 1275). In "The

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Descent into the Maelstrom," the sailor rejects all efforts to define. In calling the whirlpool "Moskoe-strom" instead of "Maelstrom," he substitutes a reference to the place of vortex for a definition. After pointing out in a catalogue all the islands in the area, the sailor concludes: "These are the true names of the places—but why it has been thought necessary to name them all, is more than you or I can understand."— *M*, 2:579.

<sup>17</sup> Throughout *Eureka*, Poe attempts "keeping unbroken that train of graduated impression by which alone the mind can comprehend..." Of course, the mind's not being able to comprehend is the effect desired. Nevertheless, Poe's remarks on the dash in "Marginalia" [*H*, 16:131] describe this punctuation as the "stepping-stones" toward those difficult to grasp ideas, a means toward accomplishing a design made up of such half-formed steps to the singular impression. My present discussion of Poe's use of the dash is a highly condensed version of an essay now in progress, "*Eureka* and the Mechanics of Vision."

<sup>18</sup> *Eureka*, p. 62.

<sup>19</sup> *H*, 11: 192.

<sup>20</sup> See Jeffrey A. Hess, "Sources and Aesthetics of Poe's Landscape Fiction," *AQ*, 22 (1970), 177-189, particularly, p. 179: "Poe is specifically referring to the American writer, Andrew Jackson Downing, whose own influential *Treatise on Landscape Gardening* was published in 1841, a year before the appearance of "The Domain of Arnheim." For other very useful treatments of Poe's landscape fiction, see also Robert D. Jacobs, "Poe's Earthly Paradise," *AQ*, 12 (Fall 1960), 405-413 and Joel R. Kehler, "New Light on the Genesis and Progress of Poe's Landscape Fiction," *AL*, 47 (1975), 173-183.

<sup>21</sup> William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, and Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; Made in the Summer of the Year 1770* (London, 1782), p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> If a love of pursuit "is implanted in our natures," if, as Hogarth continues, "the active mind is ever bent to be employ'd," the artist of the picturesque should do what he can to play upon this human instinct. The eye, he asserts, "has enjoyment in winding walks and serpentine rivers, and all sorts of objects, whose forms...are composed principally of what I call, the *waving* and *serpentine* lines." The undulations, serpentine paths and endless windings of a typical Poe landscape, whether external scene or internal decor, carries the reader through a "line of Beauty" signifying transformation. See William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, 1753 (London, 1971), pp. 24-25. For Poe, language can recreate the activity of perception, while demanding exertion of our cognitive faculties.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Price, *To the Palace of Wisdom: Studies in Order and Energy from Dryden to Blake*. (New York, 1964), p. 381. Also see Price's excellent essay, "The Picturesque Moment," in *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom, (New York, 1965), pp. 259-293. The essay by Kent Ljungquist published in this collection is a comprehensive treatment of Poe and the picturesque.

<sup>24</sup> According to Dugald Stewart, the function of the compound faculty is "to make a selection of qualities and of circumstances from a variety of different objects, and by combining and disposing these, to form a new creation of its own." The quotation is from *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, cited in the survey by Walter John Hipple, Jr., *The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory* (Carbondale, IL, 1957), p. 295. As the picturesque urges creation of a something new and unexpected, Poe's originality focuses on the novel combination of accepted forms into his prose invention.

<sup>25</sup> *H*, 12:38.

<sup>26</sup> *M*, 3:1272.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, 4th ed. (New York, 1849), p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> I am indebted throughout this section to my colleague Ann Kibbey, with whom I have talked about Poe, and whose own work on the materiality of Calvinist rhetoric has clarified many things for me. Given Poe's fascination with the "physical power of words," I suggest that what he calls his "more philosophical phraseology" is, in fact, an endorsement of a use of words as a kind of metonymic chain, crudely stated in *Eureka*: "*The Body and the Soul walk hand in hand*" (p. 41). Fact becomes fancy and fancy fact in the mutual adaptation that Poe claims as evidence of God's design in reciprocity. As the "philosopher proper," Poe attempts to show how the indefinite can take "a very determinate turn" (*Eureka*, p. 66).

<sup>29</sup> *H*, 14:273-274.

<sup>30</sup> See Martin Meisel, "The Material Sublime: John Martin, Byron, Turner, and the Theater," in *Images of Romanticism: Verbal and Visual Affinities*, eds. Kroeber and Walling (New Haven, 1978) 212-232. The essay reveals details about the nineteenth-century stage within which the originality of Poe's theatricalization of language might be judged. Meisel cites an excerpt from *Blackwood's*, 52 (1842) where the reviewer compares Turner's paintings to "'Dissolving Views,' which, when one subject is melting into another, and there are but half indications of forms, and a strange blending of blues and yellows and reds, offer something infinitely better, more grand, more imaginative than the distinct purpose of either view presents. We would therefore recommend the aspirant after Turner's style and fame, to a few nightly exhibitions of the 'Dissolving Views' at the Polytechnic, and he can scarcely fail to obtain the secret of the whole method."

<sup>31</sup> On the poems of William Cullen Bryant [*H*, 9:292], Poe writes: "Happily to endow inanimate nature with sentience and a capability of action is one of the severest tests of the poet."

<sup>32</sup> Williams, *In the American Grain*, p. 221.

<sup>33</sup> "The Philosophy of Furniture" — *M*, 2:497. Note that Poe's earliest text begins with a paragraph he later eliminated: "'Philosophy,' says Hegel, 'is utterly useless and fruitless, and, for that very reason, is the

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sublimest of all pursuits, the most deserving of our attention, and the most worthy of our zeal'—a somewhat Coleridgey assertion, with a rivulet of deep meaning in a meadow of words. It would be *wasting* time to disentangle the paradox—and the more so as no one will deny that Philosophy has its merits, and is applicable to an infinity of purposes. There is reason, it is said, in the roasting of eggs, and there is philosophy even in furniture...." Poe proves his point by initiating a dialectic of common objects. He puts atypical words into a relationship of equation. Words not metaphysically validated in their union are contrasted and synthesized: "the *soul* of the apartment is the *carpet*"; "the spirituality of a British *boudoir*"; "Never was a more lovely *thought* than that of the astral *lamp*" (the italics are mine with the exception of "*boudoir*").