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THE "AMERICAN" INFLUENCE OF POE ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN
BLACK HUMOR

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

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THE "AMERICAN" INFLUENCE OF POE ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN BLACK HUMOR

by
Damarys Lacayo-Salas

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

1983
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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SIGNED:

APPROVAL BY THESIS DIRECTOR

This thesis has been approved on the date shown below:

J.H. McElroy
Professor of English

Date
To my parents, Salvador and Ondina,

   to my sister, Xinia

      to Ott, and

         to myself.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without the help and support of many people this study could not have been done.

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ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe influenced American black humor in two ways: by means of a direct line in the "natural" development of the branch of American literature that led to it, and by means of the role that he played in France as a catalyst for the germination of artistic movements that contributed in the development of black humor. This study focuses only on the "American" influence of Poe on twentieth-century American black humor and compares some of his tales with Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts, Joseph Heller's Catch-22, and Thomas Pynchon's V. to show how Poe and these three black humorists basically seek to undermine man's belief in the reliability of his perception of reality and to maintain an intellectual control of the universe that they create in order to observe the absurdities of our human limitations from a detached point of view.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The term "black humor" was commonly used to de­
scribe a black fluid that was supposed to be the cause of
melancholy. ¹ In 1939, however, Andre Breton gave this
term a new meaning when he edited and introduced his
Anthologie de l'humour noir, a collection of different
kinds of writings by forty-five authors. According to
Mathew Winston, Breton conceives black humor

... as an attitude, a stance, or a per­
spective which exists independently of lit­
erature but which may be embodied in writing.
It uses an ironic and biting intelligence
to attack sentimentality, social convention
(including literary convention), and an ap­
parently absurd universe. It is opposed to
simplistic thinking, and expresses this op­
position by verbally yoking disparate con­
cepts without attempting to reconcile them.
It scorns the limitations of rational
thought, and therefore favors the fantastic,
the surreal, and the grotesque. It wishes
to break down complacency and to reveal how
a man's unconscious realities belie his har­
monious surface, and consequently employs
violent images and shock tactics.

Black humor is not, however, a new "attitude" dis­
covered and employed only by some twentieth century writers.
Elements of black humor can be found in the works of
Aristophanes, in La Vida del Lazarillo de Tormes, in Don
Quijote de La Mancha, in the works of Jonathan Swift, and
Shakespeare, and in many other writings. The tone of black humor has become particularly popular in post-Korean War literature.

American literary critics started using the term during the 1960's to classify the works of writers like Joseph Heller, Ken Kesey, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, and others whose novels were generally catalogued as "absurd novels" due to their relation with the Theater of the Absurd. As in the case of European literature, elements of black humor can be found in American fiction almost since the beginning of the literary history of this country, but it was not until the latter twentieth century that black humor became "a phenomenon of degree" in American literature.

On the other hand, twentieth-century American black humor was the manifestation of the normal course of the evolution of the American comic expression which, according to Jesse Bier, "may be placed along a continuum from irreverence to outright shock." On the other hand, this type of literature in America was influenced, too, by some literary and artistic movements that originated in Europe, especially in France, during the first half of the century. America had an indirect role in some of these European movements through the influence of Edgar Allan Poe on French literature, particularly his influence on Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, writers who contributed to
the development of Surrealism, Dadaism, and Antirrealism in France. Poe's role in French literature brings him back to America through the European influence on twentieth century American literature. The extent to which Poe influenced twentieth-century American literature through France might be difficult to appraise precisely. His influence through American humor on the proliferation of twentieth-century black humorists in America is quite direct and explicit.

James C. Austin considers that "humorless American critics" had difficulties understanding the "deliberate deception on the part of the humorist in the hoax, the tall tale, the shaggy dog story, the dead pan manner," until the 1920's when American scholarship came to terms with native American humor as part of American literature.\(^6\) Austin believes that even today "it sometimes takes a French critic" to show Americans the "pervasive humor" in writers like Edgar Allan Poe.\(^7\) Though not conducted by a French critic, this study will try to analyze that "pervasive humor" in Poe and investigate his presence in some of the works of three twentieth-century American black humorists: Nathanael West, Joseph Heller, and Thomas Pynchon.

T.S. Eliot as well as other critics, considered Poe as a "displaced European" because they viewed his work as deviated from the direction that the American literature of his day had taken.\(^8\) The psychological depth, the emphasis
on the fantastic, and the originality of his work set Poe apart from most of his contemporaries. Poe was certainly influenced by European romanticism, but a careful study of his work reflects not only the presence of native American forces in it, but also preferences and ideas typical of his literary milieu, as well as the writer's concern for the problems and matters of his time and social environment. Poe is distinctly American—and particularly a Southerner—precisely in the way in which he transformed the material that he had at hand achieving the place that he has in literature.

Poe's loss of his mother, of his stepmother, and, later on, of his young wife, and his fruitless struggles for financial security may account for his seeking refuge in the world of the imagination. Poe's work reflects his inner resentment towards society and his chaotic and pessimistic vision of the world. He considered men "limited, fallible, recalcitrant creatures"; therefore, human institutions could never achieve perfection; they existed only "to make reasonable freedom, order, subordination, and control possible." This way of looking at human beings and society is not only Poesque; it is also characteristic of other Southern writers of his time and, years later, the point of view taken by the black humorists.

The humor of the Old Southwest (Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Missouri)
has its origin in the oral traditions of the South. By the 1830's the Southwest was "saturated with tall tales and comic stories that were laughed at . . . wherever men gathered." Several of these men, "many of whom never thought of themselves principally as writers," began to write sketches for publication, and before the 1860's many of these writings appeared in newspapers and journals. The overwhelming proliferation of Southwestern humorous writings was from 1835 to 1861. Some of the most important works that appeared during Poe's lifetime were: Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (1835), William Tappan Thompson's *Major Jones's Courtship* (1843), Johnson Jones Hooper's *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* (1845), Thomas Bangs Thorpe's *Mysteries of the Backwoods* (1846), John S. Robb's *Streaks of Squatter Life* (1847) and Joseph M. Field's *Drama in Pokerville* (1847). Though Poe remained in the East from the late thirties until 1848, most of these stories probably passed through his hands because they were circulating in this side of the country since many were first printed in the New York *Spirit of the Times*, a humor and sporting magazine edited by William T. Porter. Poe himself reviewed in 1836, extensively and favorably, Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes*. In his review, Poe says that, "Seldom--perhaps never in our lives--have we laughed as immoderately over any book as over the one now before us."
Georgia Scenes is one of the most representative books of the humor of the Old Southwest. It is "full of sickening violence and appalling cruelty; men writhe in agony to the tune of raucous laughter." Perhaps this ability to make a joke out of "nightmarish violence" was the reason for Poe's "immoderate" laughter. He himself had, by 1836, started to make use of this technique and continued using it throughout his stories.

The use of violence, rough play, and cruelty to produce comic effects that is present in Longstreet's Georgia Scenes is also commonly employed by the other Southwestern writers of the time. The works of these writers and of Poe create "incongruous and comic situations," and use grotesque and macabre elements. The origins of the frightening or threatening, yet amusing tone of American black humor are right here in the works of the Old Southwestern writers and, as will be seen in detail later on, especially in Poe's works.

The humor of the Old Southwest was rich in exaggerations. Poe's tales are, in fact, "wild exaggerations" and can be considered "fantastic tall tales." The attempt by some humorists of the Old Southwest to record their local customs and manners in a realistic way is what separates them from Poe since he was not interested in providing a chronicle of his times. Poe considered that the function of the artist was "not to paint an object to be
true, but to appear true to the beholder.\textsuperscript{14} Poe's realism is, therefore, psychological. Twentieth-century black humorists, like the Southwestern humorists of the 1830-1860 period, are part of the realistic tradition in American literature. Black humorists make use of realistic details and are interested in history; they do try to create parallels to the history of their times but in the mode of imagination.\textsuperscript{15}

Although Poe emphasizes the importance of the self through his writings, he considers that the self is restrained by time and space and by its own internal mechanisms and, therefore, unqualified to completely comprehend reality. Reality, through the eyes of a human being is, thus, an illusion, an absurdity. He refused to be trapped by the absurdity of our human condition and tried to find an escape from the chaos. Poe thought that he could escape by means of using the strategies suggested by the German Romantic Ironists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The affinities that Poe found between his philosophical and artistic ideas and those of the German Romantic Ironists, his use of antagonistic elements in the way of the humorists of the Old Southwest, and his predilection for the hoax produced in Poe's work those characteristics that link him with the twentieth-century black humorists.
CHAPTER II

POE'S IDEA OF HUMOR

According to a classification of Poe's tales provided by G.R. Thompson, of the sixty eight stories written by Poe, thirty-three are "comic and satiric" and thirty-five are "serious," "a balancing of the serious and the comic that can hardly be mere accident." Almost all of Poe's work is, according to Thompson, "qualified by, indeed controlled by, a prevailing irony in which the artist presents us with slyly insinuated mockery of both ourselves as readers and himself as writer." Thompson goes on to assure that all of Poe's fiction and poems "can be seen as one coherent piece—as the work of one of the greatest ironists of world literature." Unfortunately, there are not many studies on Poe's humor, and the existing ones generally focus on the openly "comic" or "satiric" stories and lack a detailed explanation about Poe's use of humor in the so-called "serious" or "Gothic" tales. The explanation for this small number of deep studies on humor on Poe's writings may have been accurately pointed out by J. Marshall Trieber when, after the 1969 symposium on Poe's satire, he comments that many critics overlook that "a study of Poe's humor should be based on Poe's idea of humor, not the reader's." To understand Poe's idea of humor, it is necessary
to check not only Poe's own comments about it in his criticism, letters and tales, but also the sources of his theories.

Early in his career, Poe revealed his interest in hoaxes and satires. His "Tales of the Folio Club" were intended as parodies of popular writers and burlesques of the stories which were popular during his time. The "Tales of the Folio Club" is the title that Poe gave in 1833 to a proposed collection of his early stories which was never published as such. Originally, he intended to compile eleven tales, but, later, he changed his plans and revealed his intention of enlarging the collection to seventeen in a letter dated September 2, 1836 and directed to Harrison Hall, a Philadelphia publisher:

At different times there has appeared in the Messenger a series of Tales by myself— in all seventeen. They are of a bizarre and generally whimsical character. . . . I imagine a company of 17 persons who call themselves the Folio Club. . . . The seventeen tales which appeared in the Mess are supposed to be narrated by the seventeen members at one of these monthly meetings. As soon as one each tale is read—the other 16 members criticise it in turn—and these criticisms are intended as a burlesque upon criticism generally. . . . The critical remarks. . . have never been published. . . .

Found in a Bottle," "The Visionary" (later called "The Assignation"), "Berenice," "Morella," "Lionizing," "Hans Phaal," "King Pest," "Shadow," and "Epimanes." To complete seventeen, the tales that, in order of publication, originally followed these fourteen in the Messenger were "Silence," "Ligeia," "How to Write a Blackwood Article," "A Predicament." The ironic and satiric intentions of the "Tales of the Folio Club" were clearly stated by Poe. What deserves to be pointed out is the fact that "serious"—though it would be more appropriate to say "apparently serious"—tales such as "Ligeia," "Morella," "Berenice," "Metzengerstein." "M.S. Found in a Bottle," "The Assignation," "Shadow," and "Silence" were intended to be in the collection.

John Pendleton Kennedy was the first one to notice the comic element in Poe's writings. In a letter dated September 19, 1835, Kennedy advises Poe to write "some farces after the manner of the French Vaudevilles," and adds, "if you can--(and I think you can--) you may turn them to excellent account by selling them to the managers in New York." Kennedy, nevertheless, did not clearly understand Poe's comic intentions. In a letter on February 9, of the same year, Kennedy tells Poe:

You are strong enough now to be criticized. Your fault is your love of the extravagant. Pray beware of it. You find a hundred intense writers for one natural one. Some of your bizarreries have been mistaken for
satire—and admired too in that character. They deserved it, but *you* did not, for you did not intend them so. I like your grotesque—it is of the very best stamp, and I am sure you will do wonders for yourself in the comic, I mean the *serio tragi comic.*

Poe's reply two days later politely corrects Kennedy's assumptions:

You are nearly, but not altogether right in relation to the satire of some of my Tales. Most of them were *intended* for half banter, half satire—although I might not have fully acknowledged this to be their aim even to myself. "Lionizing" and "Loss of Breath" were satires properly speaking—at least so meant—the one of the rage for Lions, and the facility of becoming one—the other of the extravagancies of Blackwood.

The Harpers were indeed able to detect the satire of the stories in discussion but refused to publish them. Paulding tells in a letter to Thomas W. White dated March 3, 1836 the reason behind the Harpers' rejection of Poe's tales:

They say that the stories have so recently appeared before the Public in the "Messenger" that they would be no novelty—but most especially they object that there is a degree of obscurity in their application, which will prevent ordinary readers from comprehending their drift, and consequently from enjoying the fine satire they convey. It requires a degree of familiarity with various kinds of knowledge which they do not possess, to enable them to relish the joke: the dish is too refined for them to banquet on.

The "obscurity" of Poe's humor can be attributed to his preference for the practice of literary hoaxes and to the influence that the German "Romantic Ironists" had on his work and philosophical ideas.
The aim of a literary hoax is to convince the readers "not merely of false events but of the reality of false literary intentions or circumstances." The amusement of a literary hoaxter is "rather private," intended for a limited circle. If the hoax is taken to an extreme, it can limit that circle of understanding readers to one.\(^9\) Poe's definition of the "grin" of the "diddler" in his story "Diddling Considered As One of the Exact Sciences" may well define the attitude of the literary hoaxter and, therefore, of Poe himself. Poe begins defining man as "an animal that diddles, and there is no animal that diddles but man." He considers diddling as a compound of "minuteness, interest, perseverance, ingenuity, audacity, nonchalance, impatience, and grin," and he goes on defining the grin of the diddler as a private one.

Your true diddler winds up all with a grin. But this nobody sees but himself. He grins when his daily work is done—when his allotted labors are accomplished—at night in his own closet, and altogether for his own private entertainment. He goes home. He locks his door. He divests himself of his clothes. He puts out his candle. He gets into bed. He places his head upon the pillow. All this done, and your diddler grins. This is no hypothesis. It is a matter of course. I reason a priori, and a diddler would be no diddler without a grin.\(^10\)

The grin of the diddler—literary hoaxter is a grin caused by the feeling of satisfaction that he obtains by observing the rest of the people on a lower level than his;
it is a grin that implies a certain distance or detachment, a certain amount of bitterness and sarcasm. As J. Marshall Trieber points out, Poe's humor shows "his delight in overcoming others, a delight his humorous stories share with his horror and detective stories." Certainly, the echoes of Poe's grin can be heard throughout his writings, and the targets of his hoaxes are not only his readers, but also his characters and he himself.

The list of Poe's recognized attempts at "consciously hoaxing his readers" begins properly with his 1835 tale "The Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Pfaal." To produce the illusion of reality or, as he calls it, the effect of "verisimilitude," Poe provides the reader with minute details and scientific facts mixed with fantastic events following, thus, the "recipe" that he gives to the writer of "Shephard Lee" in 1836. In a passage that echoes "How to Write a Blackwood Article," Poe advises this author to write as if he were

... firmly impressed with the truth, yet astonished at the immensity, of the wonders he relates, and for which, professedly, he neither claims nor anticipates credence—in minuteness of detail, especially upon points which have no immediate bearing upon the general story—the minuteness not being at variance with indirectness of expression—in short, by making use of the infinity of arts which give verisimilitude to a narration—and by leaving the result as a wonder not to be accounted for. ... The attention of the
author, who does not depend upon explaining away his incredibilities, is directed to giving them the character and luminousness of truth, and thus are brought about, unwittingly some of the most vivid creations of human intellect. The reader, too, readily perceives and falls in with the writer's humor and suffers himself to be borne on thereby.13

"Hans Pfaal" was soon followed by another hoax, this time in the form of a novel, Poe's only novel, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1837), then "The Baloon Hoax" (1844), "The Premature Burial" (1844), "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845), "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" (1845) and "Von Kempelen and His Discovery" (1849). Poe's use of contemporary knowledge and events led many of the original readers of these stories readily to accept them as true accounts.14

The techniques of verisimilitude employed by Poe are fascinating, and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" provides a good example of them. In this story, M. Valdemar, dying of consumption, allows the narrator to mesmerize him "in articulo mortis." The narrator succeeds in keeping Valdemar in a state of suspended death for almost seven months until he decides to release the patient from the mesmeric trance. When the narrator attempts to communicate with the patient, Valdemar cries, "For God's sake! --quick!--quick!--put me to sleep--or, quick!--waken me!--quick! I say to you that I am dead!"15 After the narrator performs the mesmeric passes,
... amid ejaculations of 'dead! dead!' absolutely bursting from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity. (pp. 1242-1243)

This horror story has, nevertheless, humorous elements from the beginning. The lack of professional ethic, for instance, on the part of the narrator is evident; his "curiosity" is what induces him to perform the experiment of mesmerizing a dying person (p. 1233). The narrator thinks about Valdemar as a possible collaborator because "it was of course very natural that I should think of M. Valdemar," he says, "I knew the steady philosophy of the man too well to apprehend any scruples from him [notice the ironic emphasis that Poe gives to this word]; and he had no relatives in America who would be likely to interfere" (p. 1234). After the narrator succeeds in hypnotizing Valdemar at the moment of his death, the narrator's comments echo Poe's advice to the author of "Sheppard Lee" to achieve verisimilitude writing as if he were "firmly impressed with the truth, yet astonished at the immensity, of the wonders he relates, and for which, professedly, he neither claims nor anticipates credence." The narrator of Valdemar's story says that he has "reached a point of his narrative at which every reader will be startled into
positive disbelief," but that it is his "business," however to continue (p. 1240 ). The reader can expect anything after reaching this part of the relation; this is an ad
dvice for the reader to be prepared. After the seven months of Valdemar's "suspension" between life and death, the nar­

rator is about to relate how he awakened Valdemar when he has some comments that turn out to be highly ironic after we read the conclusion of the story:

It was on Friday last that we finally re­

solved to make the experiment of awakening,
or attempting to awaken him; and it is the (perhaps) unfortunate result of this latter experiment which has given rise to so much discussion in private circles—to so much of what I cannot help thinking unwarranted pop­

ular feeling. [italics mine] (pp. 1241-

1243)

The narrator shows absolutely no concern for the suffering that he inflicted on Valdemar.

The description of M. Valdemar before the experi­

ment is full of comic touches. Valdemar is "particularly noticeable for the spareness [italics mine] of his per­

son--his lower limbs much resembling those of John Randolph; and, also, for the whiteness of his whiskers, in violent contrast to the blackness of the hair--the latter, in con­

sequence, being very generally mistaken for a wig" (p. 1234). He has, moreover, a "markedly nervous" temper which, accord­
ing to the narrator, makes him a "good subject" for the mes­

meric experiment (p. 1234). The narrator had, nevertheless, intended to hypnotize Valdemar on two or three occasions
without achieving a complete success because Valdemar's "will" was not completely under the narrator's command (p. 1234).

The name that Poe gives to Valdemar, "Ernest," carries, also, ironic connotations when it is related to his "earnestness" to participate in the narrator's experiment which proves to have a dramatic outcome for Valdemar. Valdemar is said to be the compiler of the "Bibliotheca Forensica," a made-up work by Poe, and author, under the pseudonym of Issachar Marx, of "the Polish versions of 'Wallenstein' and 'Gargantua'" (p. 1234), works by Schiller and Rabelais. Issachar, on the other hand, is the name of the ninth son of Jacob. The name Issachar means "He brings gifts"; however, in Genesis 49:14, Jacob blesses his sons and describes Issachar as "a strong ass couching down between two burdens." The "two burdens" of Valdemar are life and death. Poe plays a hoax on Valdemar by sending him to a chaotic world where the meanings of to live and to die, to be awake and to sleep are all intermingled and obscure. When M. Valdemar "dies," he is kept "alive," but his being kept "alive" is worse than to be allowed "to die"; therefore, he has to be brought back to "life" in order to be helped "to die," and this ultimate "death" will bring him, hopefully, peace. The same is true of his being awake and asleep.
"The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" was taken seriously by people in England and America. As an example, on December 16, 1845, Robert Collyer from Boston writes a letter to Poe saying that Valdemar's case has been "universally copied" in that city and that it has created "a very great sensation." Collyer assures that he has "not the least doubt of the possibility of such a phenomenon" because he himself restored "to active animation a person who died from excessive drinking of ardent spirits." He promises Poe to send him a "detailed account" of his experiment on Poe's reply to his letter, which he requires for publication, "in order to put at rest the growing impression" that Poe's account is "merely a splendid creation of your own brain, not having any truth in fact." Five years later, in a letter to Evert A. Duyckinck, Poe makes some comments about verisimilitude and uses the example of Valdemar's story as an illustration: "In my 'Valdemar Case,'" Poe says, "(which was credited by many) I had not the slightest idea that any person should credit it as anything more than a 'Magazine-paper'--but here the whole strength is laid out in verisimilitude." When he first wrote the "Valdemar Case," Poe perhaps thought that his readers were going to take it as a comment on mesmerism, the extreme reliance on science, and the unrestraint pseudo-scientific practice, but not as a real case. To give credibility to his story, Poe uses
medical jargon, but he trusted, perhaps too much, that the careful reader of the tale will discover that the initial physical condition of Valdemar made it impossible to believe that Valdemar could possibly be still alive. A few hours before Valdemar dies, the narrator arrives and, ironically, finds him writing and talking while sitting in bed and suffering, at the same time, from an excessive expectoration caused by his having his left lung in a "semi-osseous or cartilaginous state," the upper portion of his right lung "partially, if not thoroughly, ossified, while the lower region was merely a mass of purulent tubercles, running one into another," "several perforations" in the right lobe caused by "permanent adhesion of the ribs," and an "aneurism of the aorta" (p. 1235). Poe's medical terminology "sounds quite convincing."

The ending of the "Valdemar Case" is one of the most shocking passages that Poe ever wrote. Poe's description of Valdemar's metamorphosis into a rotten mass may appear contradictory of Poe's literary principles in regards to the use of gruesome details. Poe condemns the use of minute, cruel details, particularly in his reviews of The Partisan, by William Gilmore Simms, and of Life of Petrarch, by Thomas Campbell. Poe disapproves the "instances of bad taste--villanously bad taste" that "occur frequently" in The Partisan. Among those "instances of bad taste," Poe mentions a scene in which a maniac kills a sergeant. Poe
criticizes the minute details in which this scene is presented to the reader, and comments that "the yells of the murderer, and the kicks of the sufferer, are dwelt upon by Mr. Simms with that species of delight with which we have seen many a ragged urchin spin a cockchafer upon a needle." Poe criticizes, too, the description of another murder in the book, in this case that of a poor Tory. Poe dislikes how Simms "endeavors to interest us in the screeches of the wretch—in the cries of the mother—in the cracking of the whip—in the number of lashes—in the depth, and length, and color of the wounds." Poe also comments about a section of the book in which one of the characters has caught a terrapin, and Simms, Poe says, "luxuriates in the manner of torturing the poor reptile to death, and more particularly in the writhings and spasms of the head, which he assures us with a smile 'will gasp and jerk long after we have done eating the body.'"

From the Life of Petrarch, Poe quotes as an example of "shockingly bad taste" the following passage:

The most skilful physicians stood aghast at this disease (the plague). The charlatan rejoiced at it, unless it attacked himself, because it put quackery on a par with skill; and compassionate women assisted both physicians and quacks in doing no good to their patients. . . . This was a dance of the king of terrors over the earth and a very rapid one.

Poe considers that "attempts at humor on such subject are always exceedingly low."
Poe, in fact, does not contradict himself. These two works that he criticizes make use of sadistic and cruel details. Valdemar's suffering, on the other hand, and his sudden metamorphosis are not used by Poe as sources of pleasure. Poe is not a sadistic writer. The ending of "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" has a certain lasting impact on the reader because it is the climax of the story, and because it is placed at the end of the tale leaving the reader with that scene on his mind after he closes the book. The scene is described briefly and rapidly; Poe does not linger on it and provide a long list of gruesome details. In fact, the effect is accomplished with a great economy of words; three verbs: "shrunk," "crumbled," and "rotted away," two adjectives and a noun: "loathsome," "detestable," and "putridity."

Similar in its grotesqueness to Valdemar's ending is the scene of the description of how the police find the bodies of Madame L'Espanaye and her daughter in Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." The effect of this passage is less shocking than the end of "Valdemar Case" after we finish the story. In the "Rue Morgue," the horrid details are placed relatively early in the story; then, they are "disguised" with an impersonal journalistic language; and finally, all the gruesome details receive a "logical" explanation later in the story. The ending of "Valdemar Case" is left as an unexplained wonder. The writer, therefore, has
to support the story with realistic details or the ending will be so heavy that the whole story will collapse. Poe's description of Valdemar's physical condition accounts for his "realistic" details, but in this case Poe uses a kind of "pseudo-realism" because his medical report is intended as a hoax too. Poe's use of medical jargon in the story has the same function as his use of journalistic language in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." In both cases, the use of a professional jargon softens the impact of the "realistic" elements by establishing a certain distance between the reader and what is being said. Realism is used by him as an illusion, but it is not his purpose to write a realistic story. If the reader has been able to detect the comic exaggeration of the medical report on Valdemar's condition, the end of the story does not produce an overwhelming shocking effect on him. Perhaps the novelty of mesmerism and interest of the people in it, combined with the careless reading of the story and the ignorance of his readers turned the illusion accomplished by Poe into reality, and the story into a hoax on the readers.

With the same strength that he uses to criticize Simms' and Campbell's works, Poe praises Georgia Scenes and the "truest humor" of its writer, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet. Longstreet's humor, as mentioned earlier, is a mixture of violence, rough play, cruelty and comedy. "The Horse-Swap" and "The Flight," two of Longstreet's most
popular stories, very typical of his humor, were objects of Poe's favorable comments. Talking about "The Horse-Swap," Poe says that it is

...a vivid narration of an encounter between the wits of two Georgian horse-jockeys. This is most excellent in every respect—but especially so in its delineations of Southern bravado, and the keen sense of the ludicrous evinced in the portraiture of the steeds. We think the...sketch of a hoss superior, in joint humor and verisimilitude, to anything of the kind we have ever seen.24

About "The Fight," Poe comments that:

...although involving some horrible and disgusting details of southern barbarity [it] is a sketch unsurpassed in dramatic vigor, and in the vivid truth to nature of one or two of the personages introduced.25

Longstreet's "disgusting details" are used to give a realistic atmosphere to the stories and, at the end, they are absorbed by the overall comic effect of the story. Moreover, in Longstreet's sketches, no one gets really hurt. The owners of the horses in "The Horse-Swap accept their "share" of the deal in a resigned and chivalric manner. Also, in "The Fight" the two men shake hands at the end and become friends again, making the story a hoax of violence. Moreover, both sketches have didactic intentions. Poe is, therefore, willing to forgive Longstreet for his use of "disgusting details" because he does not use them with sadistic intentions. J. Marshall Trieber's words provide a good summary of Poe's attitude in regards to the use of sadism in literature:
Absurd things do not hurt; exaggeration renders the horrible ridiculous, turns terror into smiles.

Contrary to what some critics have suggested about Poe's humor, it involves no real sadism, no pleasure derived from causing other people to suffer. There is, however, a quality that lies back of slapstick comedy, that takes pleasure not in causing pain, but in hearing about pain, called Schadenfreude in German but with no name in our own language. It is a feeling of real humor, though. It is the enjoyment we might feel if we heard of a pompous person slipping on a banana—the humor of scorn, wherein our own superiority is tacitly affirmed. The quality Poe often manifests.

This quality of slapstick comedy present in Poe's works can be better understood after reading the definition of humor that Poe gives in his review of N.P. Willis' *American Prose Writers*. In his theory, Poe relates humor with imagination, fancy and fantasy:

> The fact seems to be that Imagination, Fancy, Fantasy, and Humor have in common the elements Combination and Novelty. The Imagination is the artist of the four. From novel arrangements of old forms... it selects only such as are harmonious—the result, of course, is beauty itself... The pure Imagination chooses, from either beauty or deformity, only the most combinable things hitherto uncombined... But as often analogously happens in physical chemistry, so not unfrequently does it occur in this chemistry of the intellect, that the admixture of two elements will result in a something that shall have nothing of the quality of one of them—or even nothing of the qualities of either. The range of Imagination is therefore, unlimited... Now, when the harmony of the combination is comparatively neglected, and when in addition to the element of novelty, there is introduced the sub-element of
unexpectedness—when, for example, matters are brought into combination which not only have never been combined but whose combination strikes us as a difficult happily overcome—the result appertains to the FANCY.

Carrying its errors into excess—for, however, enticing, they are errors still, or Nature lies,—Fancy is at length found impinging upon the province of Fantasy. The votaries of this latter delight not only in novelty and unexpectedness of combination, but in avoidance of proportion. . . . When, proceeding a step farther, however, Fantasy seeks not merely disproportionate but incongruous or antagonistical elements, the effect is rendered more pleasurable from its greater positiveness;—there is a merry effort of Truth to shake from her that which is no property of hers:—and we laugh outright in recognizing Humor.

The four faculties in question appear to me all of their class;—but when Fancy or Humor is expressed to bain an end—is pointed at a purpose—whenever either becomes objective in place of subjective—then it becomes, also pure Wit or Sarcasm, just as the purpose is well intentioned or malevolent. 27

Poe’s theory of humor was probably influenced by his reading of Victor Hugo’s preface to Cromwell (1827), Sir Walter Scott’s essay about the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann, and the works of a group of German writers and thinkers known as “Romantic Ironists." His idea of yoking antagonistic elements to convey humor is of great importance to the understanding of all of Poe’s fiction and of some of his philosophical ideas. The same combination of opposing elements that characterizes Poe’s humor is also the governing principle underneath the works of the twentieth-century black humorists. In black humor, the antagonistic elements are
yoked in such a violent way that the reader is led into a state between laughter and fear.
CHAPTER III

POE'S IRRONIC TECHNIQUES AND BLACK HUMOR

Victor Hugo's preface to his verse drama, Cromwell (1827), appeared four years before Poe sent his first tales to a publisher, and it soon became very well-known in America. In this piece of writing, Hugo uses the term "grotesque" to indicate "an ambiguous comic genre, creating what is on the one hand 'deformed and horrible,' and on the other what is 'comic and farcical." Victor Hugo's conception of the grotesque reflects the concern for a union of opposites that characterizes the works of the Romantic Ironists. Hugo says that in art, "'an ugly, horrible, hideous thing,' transformed by 'truth and poetry' becomes 'beautiful, admirable, sublime, without losing anything of its monstrosity.'" His idea of the grotesque involves "a structural principle of ironic contrast leading to 'a vision of the great infernal laughter.'"¹

In 1827, also, Scott's article "On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition; and Particularly on the Works of Ernest Theodore William Hoffmann" was published in the Foreign Quarterly Review. Scott's review contained a summary of Hoffmann's "The Entail," which provided some of the Gothic elements for Poe's "Metzengerstein" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." More important, nevertheless, is
Scott's explanation of the psychology of the supernatural in literature in terms of effect. Scott talks about the grotesque and the arabesque styles and effects with reference to the comic possibilities of the Gothic. Scott says that the "'comic side of the supernatural'... may either entirely travesty and hold up to laughter the Gothic or generate a sort of 'imperfect excitement'" and considers that this kind of "supernatural romance" has been successfully used by French and German writers. Scott points out that as a result of the Germans' attachment to the mysterious, there is "a species of supernatural romance, allied to the satiric, to the comic, to the comic-heroic, to the eccentric, and to the fairy tale" which, according to him, "may be called the FANTASTIC mode of writing--in which the most wild and unbounded license is given to an irregular fancy, and all species of combination, however ludicrous, or however shocking, are attempted and executed without scruple." In his comment about Hoffmann, Scott describes his works as "'grotesque' pieces of 'diablerie,' which do not have quite the quality of the true supernatural," and Hoffmann's use of the grotesque as similar to the arabesque in painting. Scott remarks that Hoffmann's "'sickly and disturbed train of thought... led him to confound the supernatural with the absurd.'"²

G.R. Thompson considers Poe's reading of Scott's article as crucial in the development of Poe's literary and
aesthetic ideas. Thompson says that Scott's remarks about the comic possibilities of the Gothic were "seminal for the young Poe, interested in the Gothic and yet possessed of a sardonic turn of mind," and that they support relating Poe's "Gothicism" to the German concepts of ironic horror and whimsy. Also, Thompson emphasizes the fact of Scott's linking of the terms "grotesque" and "arabesque" as a probable influence on Poe's own use of the two terms as "near synonyms"—a use found also among the Romantic Ironists.3

The German "Romantic Ironists" of the early nineteenth century had a great influence on Poe. During the end of the eighteenth century and the first two decades of the nineteenth, writers like Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, J.M.R. Lenz, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and Ludwig Tieck anticipated Poe in the explorations of the psychological and the occult. By Poe's time, Romanticists generally felt that "the secrets of Nature lay deep within the human mind itself." In their study of mental aberrations, many of them, particularly the Germans, became "increasingly pessimistic about man's ability to free himself from the web of illusion that existence seemed to present." Nevertheless, a small group of writers and thinkers worked on the development of "a liberating if still rather gloomy theory of the darkly comic" together with a philosophy of "Transcendental Irony" or, as it is better known, "Romantic Irony." This philosophy intended to provide a relief for the "deep-thinking
man." The ultimate aim of the "Romantic Ironists" was to annihilate the "apparent contradictions and earthly limitations through a liberating perception of the element of Absurd in the mysterious contrarities of the Universe." By means of their "contrariness, deceptiveness, satire, and self-mockery," the Romantic Ironists tried to achieve "a penetrating view of existence from a subliminally Idealistic height" (perhaps equivalent to Poe's "lunyeye view") but viewing, at the same time, "the terrors of an ultimately incomprehensible, disconnected, absurd, or at best probably decaying and possibly malevolent Universe." For the Romantic Ironist, harmony was achieved, thus, through a "double vision" of the world, "a double awareness, a double emotion, culminating in an ambilient joy of stoical self-possession and intellectual control."4 The Romantic Ironist

... held the world together by the force of his own mind -- or he watched the "world" and his own mind crumble under the stress of dark contrary forces. The result, in the works of these writers, is an ambivalent pessimism: a kind of black humor, a black irony, and also a skepticism engendered by the self-awareness of the subjective human mind insistently reaching out toward an illusive certainty.5

In Eureka: A Prose-Poem, his myth of the cosmos, Poe assures us that out of God's volition "a particle absolutely unique, undivided" was created. The same force that created this particle impelled it to expand and form the whole universe. But this "forcing" of the "originally and
therefore normally One into the abnormal condition of Many implies a reaction. A diffusion from Unity under the conditions, involves a tendency to return into Unity—a tendency uneradicable until satisfied. The universe, therefore, is compelled to a continuous pulsating; endlessly creating when it expands and endlessly destroying when it contracts. This continuous pulsating is aiming towards the inevitable destruction of the material universe. Annihilation, however, will have a positive result since it implies a return to the original unity of all things in God, a return to normality. The pattern, nevertheless, has an ironic turn. Eureka seems to present "a skepticism that results from the appalling possibility that the essence of the universe is neither creative nor destructive in any design—but simply void." The act of seeing a symmetric design behind the creation of the universe might be an illusion created by man's mind to avoid a confrontation with his absurd fate. "The birth, death, and resurrection of the universe as stated in Eureka has a further (aesthetic) twist," that, according to G.R. Thompson, has been ignored by Poe's readers. The pattern or design that Poe sees is "a melancholy symmetry of nothingness." The present material universe, according to Poe, is an expression of God's original "ni-hility." When God's present expansiveness concentrates again into primal "unity," the universe will "sink at once into that Nothingness which, to all Finite Perception,
Unity must be—into that Material Nihility from which it was evoked. What will then remain will be God in his original state: nothingness.°

The pattern that Poe seems to point out in the universe is symmetrical, but it is a symmetry of nothingness: "The origin of the universe lies in nothingness, its present material state is but a variation of the original nothingness, and its final end is a reconstruction of the original nothingness."¹⁰

Most religions believe in a life after death; a spiritual life in which our souls are going to be reunited with their creator, and we are going to achieve eternal happiness and perfection. Poe studies the possibility of a conspiracy-like universe created by a deceitful and selfish God. In the middle of this universe that is running toward its own destruction, God arbitrarily placed man and gave him the ability to reason which compels man to find explanations to everything; yet time, space, and the limitations of his inner self prevent man from comprehending the whole of reality. What we consider reality is just a piece of a whole and, therefore, inaccurate and chaotic. We have been placed in the middle of a symmetric gigantic maze; from our position we see "nothing," there is no way out of the maze and even if we could find a way to escape, at the end we will encounter "nothing." The maze is a cosmic catch-22, a hoax played on our expectations by a selfish God for his personal enjoyment.
Only through the exercising of his imaginative power can man perceive and transcend the nothingness of his existence; "except by aesthetic analogy with creative imagination in man, we do not know what the universe is, nor do we know that we know anything." The artist, according to the German Romantic Ironists and to Poe, is able to detach himself from his earthly limitations and reach a position of "objective subjectivity" where he can laugh at the absurdity of his existence. The facing of nothingness provides, ultimately, a certain relief. The laughter of the Romantic Ironist is like the grin of Poe's diddler.

Poe's narrators do face destruction; some of them are apparently able to separate themselves from their subjectivity through dreamlike states, drugs, madness, or mesmerism. The narrators' reports, however, cannot be trusted because their perceptions of reality are distorted by their abnormal states. The writer is the only one who controls the situation because he sees the whole pattern from a higher position, from an objective level. The reader is purposely misled by the narrators, but if he can detect the writer's scheme behind the story, he can reach a superior position, too, and, finally, laugh at the story. Poe intentionally mocks man's ability to perceive the world (therefore, his own), man's rational powers, and the responses of the reader.
According to Raymond Immerwahr, the term "Romantic Irony" conveys a different meaning than the meanings generally associated to the two words separately. From the ordinary usage of the word "irony," the Romantic Ironist implies something different from what he appears to be saying. However, the Romantic Ironist, remarks Immerwahr, "does not mean simply the opposite of what he says," but "he is likely to mean at the same time both what he seems to be saying and its opposite." The Gothic and Romantic themes or materials picked up by the German Romantic Ironists are used, therefore, in pursuit of a double effect, "half-mocking, half-serious," in order to develop the theme of "deceptiveness of appearances." Poe's technique is one of triple deceptiveness: on a supernatural level, on a psychological level, and on a satirical and ironic level. Poe's use of an ironic pattern of deceptiveness does not necessarily mean that the reader cannot enjoy the stories on their basic level. Nevertheless, the discovery of the Romantic Ironic twist—particularly in the "Gothic" stories—makes the enjoyment of reading the tales even greater.

Poe weaves his ironic techniques in different frames. He uses, for instance, a satirical or obviously comic frame in tales such as "Lionizing," "How to Write a Blackwood Article," "A Predicament," and "Some Words with a Mummy," a philosophical and lyrical frame in "Silence," a "ratiocinative" frame in "The Purloined Letter" and "The
Murders in the Rue Morgue," and a Gothic frame in "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Ligeia," and "Metzengerstein." In all of the stories, Poe uses a juxtaposition of antagonistic elements to convey humor and deceptive techniques to confuse the reader. No matter what kind of frame he is using or what kind of "narrative mask" he is wearing, Poe's aim in all his stories is "to dramatize" his "contempt for rationalism or any other philosophical system in the face of the chaotic horrors of human existence" and, at the same time, "to save the mind from its own worst foreboding."

As Robert Kierly points out, "to reject rational systems as reflectors of general truth is not necessarily to deny their value as preservers of sanity in the individual mind. All in one breath ... Poe seems to assert the falsehood of system and the necessity of falsehood."¹⁶

"The Man That Was Used Up--A Tale of the Late Bugaboo and Kickapoo Campaign" is a tale that can be enjoyed from different angles. The story is obviously humorous and contains a great deal of social criticism directed mainly against the artificial society of the 1830's and 1840's. By means of the narrator's journey in search of "the truth," Poe criticizes the church, the worship of the dead, the love of melodrama and oratory among his contemporaries, the fashionable follies of the women of his time, the praising of technological progress, and the disregard for moral values. The story has also been read as anti-Jackson
political propaganda and as a caricature of Van Buren's Vice-President, Colonel Richard M. Johnson.  

The world depicted in "The Man That Was Used Up" is an absurd one. The narrator cannot rely on his perception of the world; appearance and reality are totally different things. The reader is also led by the narrator to develop a mistaken picture of the Brigadier. The "truly fine-looking fellow" with the finest bust that the narrator ever saw, glossy hair, a handsome pair of whiskers, a mouth "utterly unequalled," brilliantly white teeth, extraordinary eyes, broad shoulders, admirably modelled arms, good legs, and a "properly porportioned calf" turns out to be an "exceedingly odd-looking bundle" that requires a cork leg, an artificial arm, artificial shoulders, chest, palate, teeth, and an eye and a wig to look like a man. The "air distingué" that the narrator notices in the General when he first sees him becomes literal, since the Brigadier is almost air, a hollow man. The story becomes a parody of the traditional heroic stories because what the narrator's society worships is, ironically, a man that is almost nothing, a disguised scarecrow.  

The narrator of the story is even more foolish than his society because he judges the Brigadier solely by his physical appearance. After the narrator discovers that the fine physical appearance of the General is artificially achieved, he feels so disappointed that he leaves the
General's house as soon as he can and does not care at all about the General's story. Moreover, the narrator has to be nearly blind not to have noticed what the "remarkable something" of the General was. The General is certainly remarkable because he can move around "naturally" carrying so many "unnatural" or artificial devices.

The readers of "The Man That Was Used Up" are used by the narrator and by the author. The reader sympathizes with the narrator and, therefore, accompanies him along his journey, undergoing the same frustration that the narrator experiences. At the end, the reader feels that, like the narrator, he has finally surpassed all the obstacles and disclosed the truth about the Brigadier. Nevertheless, "the truth" that the reader is given about the Brigadier's story is very partial because it is only the narrator's impression of the Brigadier. The reader is led to believe the narrator's initial idealization of the Brigadier and to share his disillusionment when he faces the truth. At the end, the reader is also led to consider the General as an "exceedingly odd-looking bundle" and not as a man because this is the last impression of the General given by the narrator.

The narrator of "The Man That Was Used Up" turns out to be a foil of Dupin--Poe's fictional sleuth--and the story a parody of mystery and detective stories. The narrator sees the Brigadier's story as a prospective mystery
that he has to disclose. His investigation clarified the mystery about the Brigadier, but in a partial manner because the story is biassed by the narrator's near-sightedness.

The narrator of the story mentions at the beginning of the tale that he is "constitutionally nervous" and that "the slightest appearance of mystery" puts him "at once into a pitiable state of agitation". A remark of this kind made by a Poe narrator is an immediate clue for the reader to distrust all the information that he receives. The story is, therefore, a parody not only of the ideal man, but also of mystery stories because there is no mystery.

Poe's use of antagonistic elements to convey humor in "The Man That Was Used Up" is done through his making fun of the maiming of a man. This story can be compared to Bergson's ideas about comedy. Years after Poe, Bergson stated that

A comic impasse occurs whenever a human being ceases to behave like a human being—that is, whenever he resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once for all and capable of working automatically, but is incapable of living. The instant this automatic figure appears under the glare of our intelligence, he looks ridiculous, particularly when he is caught at an intersection of events where his automatic response is seen to be inadequate. Then he is isolated.

"Silence--A Fable" is a piece of writing that has puzzled, and even fooled, many critics. In 1931, James Southall Wilson was the first one who detected an ironic
vein in "Silence." In his article "The Devil Was in It," Wilson comments that he could not bring himself to believe that

... with his keen sense of the ludicrous, he [Poe] could have been serious when he wrote into that melodious piece of prose the shieking of waterlilies or the stems, and used as a refrain 'the rock rocked' and phrases such as 'the thunder fell.' 20

Wilson recalls that Poe first called "Silence" "a tale in the manner of the psychological autographists" and that he used as his motto a phrase from one of his own poems, 'Ours is a world of words: quiet we call Silence—which is the merest word of all.' After examining these details, Wilson is convinced that in "Silence" Poe was trying to mock the Transcendentalists' mysticism by showing how "sonorous and beautiful words could be made to sound—signifying nothing." 21 Poe parodies Bulwer and De Quincey, too.

"Silence" is one of the Tales of the Folio Club and under a flawed poetic style, it develops the Romantic Ironic theme of a deceptive and illusory world and exposes Poe's idea about the universe as presented in Eureka. The narrator of the story retells a story that a Demon told him. In the story the Demon amuses himself observing the reactions of a man who, apparently disgusted with mankind, sits on a rock to meditate and observe the surroundings. The setting is a valley called Desolation. The man trembles in
the solitude of the valley but clings to the rock and endures until the Demon sends "the curse of silence" and transforms the valley of Desolation into a valley of Silence, of Nothingness. The transformation terrifies that much in such a horrible way that he runs away. The telling of the story makes the Demon laugh hysterically and curse the narrator because he does not laugh. While this happens, a lynx stares steadily at the Demon's face. 22

The lynx eye is the symbol of the ironic vision "peering unflinchingly into the face of perversity." 23 The lynx is the representation of the Romantic Ironist facing the absurdity of the world without withdrawing in despair. Poe uses the lynx eye metaphor in *Marginalia*, too, where he mentions that "It is only the philosophical lynx eye that through the indignity-mist of Man's life, can still discern the dignity of Man." 24

In his tales of ratiocination, Poe uses the same basic deceptive pattern. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," for instance, is a hoax played upon the reader through Dupin. Poe, himself, explains in a letter to Philip Pendleton Cooke on August 9, 1846, his ironic technique. "You are right about the hair-splitting of my French friend [Dupin]," says Poe,

...that is all done for effect. These tales of ratiocination owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key. I do not mean to say they are not ingenious— but people think they are more ingenious than
they are—on account of their method and air of method. . . . Where is the ingenuity of unravelling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unravelling? The reader is made to confound the ingenuity of the supposititious Dupin with that of the writer of the story.  

Dupin takes the position of the Romantic Ironist artist observing the events from an objective position; he is the equivalent of the lynx. The difference with the pattern that Poe uses in the ratiocinative tales is that the world of these tales does have a logical pattern or design, which can be explained and understood.

In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Poe manipulates the reader and makes him fall into "the gross but common error of confounding the unusual with the abstruse"; an error that, according to Dupin, prevents the police from finding the murderer of the two women. Even though Dupin shows his confidence in solving the mystery of the murders, the story emphasizes the "supernatural" circumstances that surround the crime and the "excessively outré" characteristics of "the butchery itself"; "something altogether irreconcilable with our common notions of human action" (p. 557). The more Dupin is trying to find a logical explanation, the more the narrator and the reader are led to believe that the murders are "a grotesquerie in horror absolutely alien from humanity" (p. 558). The alien quality of the murders is emphasized by the reports of the murderer's voice—"that very peculiar shrill (or harsh) and unequal voice,
about whose utterance no syllabification could be detected*" (p. 555)--and by "the almost preternatural character" of the agility that the murderer might have had to accomplish his deed (p. 555). When the narrator, "completely unnerved," observes that the tuft of hair found in Madame L'Espanaye's "rigidly clutched fingers" is "no human hair" (p. 558), he and the reader have already been "duped into fancying some unnameable horror." Immediately after having "unnerved" the narrator, Dupin provides the realistic explanation. By his use of "deduction" and a leap of imagination," Dupin has been able to see "through a chaos of bizarre appearances to the more pedestrian reality behind the deceptive 'facts'":

A nonhuman but humanlike animal, an escaped orangutan, has killed two women, a rather disappointingly commonplace (certainly not grotesque) fusing of two different realms of existence, though doubtless satisfying on a detective-story level.

Dupin brings the reader to "a flesh-creeping sense of the uncanny" only to give him, later, a rational explanation. This technique resembles the Romantic Irony used by Poe at the conclusion of "The Premature Burial."

After providing the reader a convincing series of scary medical reports about people who had been buried alive, the Quijote-like narrator of "The Premature Burial," an assiduous reader of Gothic stories on burial alive and,
apparently a sufferer of catalepsy, tells how he became obsessed by the idea of being buried alive while having a cataleptic trance. He ordered the construction of a special sepulcher that could be opened from within and a coffin with a hole for a string attached to a bell that was supposed to be tied to his hand to prevent his having to remain in the coffin in case he was mistakenly buried alive. The narrator tells how one day he awakened, feeling that he was not awaking from an ordinary sleep but from a trance and how the darkness of the place led him to think that he had, in fact, been buried alive. His fear grows almost uncontrolable when he cannot find the string attached to his hand, cannot move, and perceives an earthy smell. He deduces, therefore, that he has been buried in a common coffin and thurst into a grave. However, after he finds strength to cry aloud, he discovers that he had simply fallen asleep in the narrow berth of a ship where he had sought refuge for the night. The ending of the tale turns the "Gothic" story into a hoax, particularly after the "suddenly-cured" narrator makes fun of his own narrative:

My soul acquired tone--acquired temper. I went abroad. I took vigorous exercise. I breathed the free air of Heaven. I thought upon other subjects than Death. I discarded my medical books. "Buchanan" I burned. I read no "Night Thoughts" -- no fustian about church-yards--no bugaboo tales--such as this. 30

The final paragraph of the story summarizes, perhaps, the attitude of the Romantic Ironist towards the
The terrifying nothingness of the cosmos is to be observed from an objective distance, not from within. Also, these final lines "suggest with nice ambiguity both the psychological and the supernatural, and leave us entertaining the serious possibilities of the absurd situation." 31

Even Poe's most serious tales are part of the continuum of satiric irony that is present in his other tales. In his "Gothic" stories, Poe is more successful in his mockery of the human condition. The narrators of some of these tales try to convince the reader about the truthfulness of their experiences by doing a pretended-objective report of the situations. The readers are fooled by the narrators but, ironically, the narrators are fooled, too, by the writer. Also, the telling of the story does not provide the narrators with a relief or a solution to escape from annihilation. Tales such as "William Wilson," "The Black Cat," "The Man of the Crowd," "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Cask of Amontillado" are examples of this technique.
In his article, "The Kindred Artist; or the Case of the Black Cat," John H. McElroy demonstrates how a careful reading and the discovery of the two simultaneous perspectives in that story—the narrative and the authorial—can turn a horror tale into a humorous one. The clue to "The Black Cat" resides in the discovery that the narrator's first victim—the black cat—and the second one are both "coincidentally" concealed in freshly plastered walls. The narrator admits his having killed the cat but denies his agency for its image in the wall. The same night when he killed the cat and left it, according to him, hanging from a tree, his house was destroyed by a fire. Nevertheless, his denial of a connection between the killing of the cat and the fire suggests fear of someone connecting the two events. In reporting the killing of the cat, the narrator convinces the reader that he felt remorse and cried while committing the horrible deed. He begs God for forgiveness, using his "sincerity" and his being "victimized" by a primitive impulse that he calls "Perverseness" as his appeal for compassion. The narrator's words are intended to convince the reader that he, too, is able to commit an action like the one perpetrated by the narrator because this perverseness is inside of all human beings. "Who has not," the narrator says, "a hundred times found himself committing a vile or a silly action for no other reason than because he knows he should not?" The action that the narrator has perpetrated
is not, however, a silly one. His words are, therefore, an excuse for his sadism. The narrator also states that he killed the cat because he knew that in doing so, he was jeopardizing his soul "... as to place it--if such a thing were possible--even beyond the reach of the infinity mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God" (p. 852). The narrator tries to suggest that God forgives him because, according to McElroy, "fundamental theology teaches us that God will not condemn the penitent for their sins," and the narrator showed that he was "so penitent that he wept" while killing the animal.

In his report of the happenings after the fire, the narrator in "The Black Cat" mentions how the only wall of the burned down house that remained standing has been recently plastered and how the bas-relief of the cat appeared on this wall the next morning. The narrator's explanation for the appearance of the image is hilarious once the reader has detected the narrator's manipulations. The narrator comments that

The cat, I remembered, had been hung in the garden adjacent to the house. Upon the alarm of fire, this garden had been immediately filled by the crowd--by some one of whom the animal must have been cut from the tree and thrown, through an open window, into my chamber. This had probably been done with the view of arousing me from sleep. The falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly-spread plaster, the lime of which, with the
flames, and the ammonia from the carcass, had then accomplished the portraiture as I saw it. (p. 853)

The narrator's explanation is "no explanation at all"; it is only "obfuscation for the sake of exculpation." McElroy believes that from the authorial perspective, the narrator hanged the cat, brought the dead animal to his bedroom, excavated a hole in the wall behind his bed, buried the cat, and plastered the wall again. With the heat of the fire, the dehydration and shrinking of the plaster, the cat was literally pushed forward with the rope still around his neck in bas-relief.35 It is quite possible that the narrator himself set the fire.

The narrator presents the murder of his wife almost as an accident that occurred during "a household errand." He claims that the impertinence of the second cat awakened again his Perverseness and made him try to kill the animal, and that his anger with his wife's interference carried him to kill her with an axe that he appears to have been carrying. He hides the body inside a wall in his basement, but when he looks for "the beast," the cat has disappeared. The body of the wife is not detected by the police when they search the house for the first time. During the second search, while the police are making their "third or fourth" descent into the cellar, the narrator strikes the wall behind which he is hiding his wife's corpse. The cat that he
had walled up too shrieks at this point revealing the truth to the police.

The narrator of "The Black Cat" is not the victim of a subconscious drive to have his crime detected and punished. He is, however, the victim of a kind of "Imp of the Perverse." The purpose of his lying is to assure his superiority, to laugh at the credulity of his listener and to laugh at his impending death. He was trying to do the same thing when the police came for the second time, and he started scratching the very portion of the wall behind which the evidence of his murder was concealed. The reaching of the authorial perspective will prove that, once again, the narrator is condemned to fail because we are able to detect his lies.

Using the same deceiving technique, Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado" tries to make us believe that he committed the perfect crime when he killed Fortunato. Montresor's telling of the story after fifty years reveals that Fortunato has been kept alive in his mind. Montresor, not Fortunato, is, therefore, the real victim of the story.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the narrator tries to convince the reader about the irrationality of the events that he witnesses, that the story is about the Ushers, not about himself, and that Roderick Usher, not he himself, is the one who becomes progressively insane.

Nevertheless, significantly, the narrator mentions at
the beginning of the story, even before he sees Roderick, that the sight of the House of Usher makes him experience "a sense of insufferable gloom" in his spirit, "an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium."36 He thinks that "a different arrangement of the particulars of the scene" would change his first impression; he brings his horse to the brink of "a black and lurid tarn" to gaze down at the inverted image of the scene; however, this new experience only makes him feel "a shudder even more thrilling than before" (p. 398). It is not until this moment that the narrator mentions the purpose of his being "passing alone" close by the House of Usher. He mentions, too, that his "childish experiment" of "looking down within the tarn" has but deepened his first impression.

"There can be no doubt," he says,

that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition—for why should I not term it?—served mainly to accelerate the increase itself. Such I have long know, is the paradoxical law of all sentiments having terror as a basis. (p. 399)

The narrator, afraid of his own feelings, uplifts his eyes again and comments:

I had so worked upon my imagination as to really believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor,
dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued. (pp. 399-400)  

He tries, then, to shake off from his spirit "what must have been a dream" (p. 400). His impression about the decadence reigning in the place does not change, however, and he perceives how a fissure that runs from the roof of the house to the wall continues until it becomes "lost in the sullen waters of the tarn" (p. 400). After he discovers the fissure in the wall, he goes inside the house. All the events can be considered, therefore, the product of the narrator's overactive imagination excited by the lonely and gloomy atmosphere of the place, just a dream or a hallucination, though the rational explanations of the narrator mask the subjectivity of his account and emphasize the irrationality of the happenings.

The world that the narrator encounters inside the House of Usher is more depressing than the one outside, and it follows an inverted order of life and death. Roderick, who is alive, has "a cadaverousness of complexion" (p. 401) and an "Arabesque expression" which the narrator cannot connect "with any idea of simple humanity" (p. 402). Roderick's sister, Madeline, returns from her grave after seven or eight days of having been buried.

Madeline's return from her grave to kill her brother can be explained as a hallucination experienced not only by Roderick, but also by the narrator who, by that time, has
already been "infected" by Roderick's disease and excited by the fantastic story, the "Mad Trist," that he reads to Usher. Immediately after Madeline kills her brother, the "rational" narrator tells us that "from that chamber, and from that mansion, Ifeld aghast" (p. 417). From the distance, the narrator gazes how the fissure of the wall of the House of Usher rapidly widens and how the house sinks into the tarn. Significantly, the narrator does not provide any rational explanation; his mind can no longer find a coherent explanation to anything. The narrator is not only telling the story of Roderick Usher's progressive mental disintegration, but that of his own mind as well. Poe's deceptive pattern can be discovered throughout his tales working at different levels of interpretation. His humor is primarily intellectual since, in most of his tales, its discovery depends upon an analytical interpretation of the stories.

There are many parallels between Poe's conception of the universe, his techniques as Romantic Ironist and those of the twentieth-century humorists. The world of the black humorists is as absurd as Poe's, so absurd that they do not try to change it or to give any hope to the reader; the black humorists simply watch it crumble and laugh at it. The black humorists yoke disparate concepts and do not attempt to reconcile them; they want to shock and confuse the reader. By showing the absurdity of the world, the black humorists are, like Romantic Ironists, assuming a superior
position from the one held by the reader. They have an ability to separate themselves from the absurd and face it that the reader does not easily achieve. Black humorists use, like Poe, verisimilitude; the world that they portray, even though bizarre and surrealistic, contains clear realistic details; it is not altogether fantastic. Like Poe, the black humorists mock, and even insult, man's ability to perceive the world and his rational powers. The acquisition of a "detached" perspective is, therefore, a requirement to obtain the authorial point of view and see the deceptive pattern used by Poe and the twentieth-century black humorists and to enjoy the two levels in which their stories and novels work.
CHAPTER IV

POE, NATHANAEL WEST AND MISS LONELYHEARTS

Nathanael West's nihilistic vision of the world has gained him the titles of "the progenitor of the black humor of the 60's"\(^1\) and of "forerunner of later writers of the absurd."\(^2\) West's absurd conception of society and of the universe in general has been attributed, in part, to his acceptance and practice of some of the principles of Dadaism, Surrealism, and Symbolism that became familiar to him through his readings and his direct contact with some of the exponents of their principles during the time that he lived in Paris (1924-1926). Dadaism was an example of the "complete cynicism" produced by World War I; its underlying spirit, as defined by James F. Light, was "disgust, revolt, destruction, and despair," despair being "the key word" since the Dadaists themselves accepted "the helplessness of their own protests against organized society."\(^3\) Dadaism reached its peak by 1921 and by the time of West's arrival in Paris, Surrealism was a much more fashionable movement.

Like Dadaism, surrealism was devoted to the ideal of artistic liberty, but surrealism had swerved from Dadaism's motifs of disgust and despair to an artistic attempt to discover a realm of reality beyond the physical. The surreal was deep within the inner life of man and could be discovered in dreams and fantasies. The function of the artist was merely to record the revelations, sometimes

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induced by drugs, of the subconscious, unreasoning mind.\textsuperscript{4}

From the surrealists, West probably learned that "the most cruel but most efficient way to overcome conventionalized or dramatized feelings" was making fun of them and to avoid the use of the traditional forms of comedy and tragedy in favor of a blend of the serious and the comic. West probably owes to the surrealists, too, his "peculiar use of the grotesque" and his "violent rejection of the human condition."\textsuperscript{5} These movements of Dadaism and Surrealism that West directly confronted in Paris were not completely new to him because, before he left for France, he had read and "been excited by" the works of some of the French symbolists and Poe, who was "as prominent an influence upon French surrealism as the earlier symbolists."\textsuperscript{6} His readings and his confrontation with the French artistic turmoil helped West to shape his ideas about life and art and to develop his own artistic method. West acquired a pessimistic vision of the world; he felt that the universe was against man and that man's efforts against it were useless; at the same time, he was moved by the hopelessness of the human condition. His works reflect, therefore, a "tension between abstract intolerance and concrete love of humanity," a split between his emotions and his intellect.\textsuperscript{7}

Thus, for all his emotional involvement, his savagery and bitterness, one finds an intellectual detachment which gave him his great ability to mock emotions at their source. . . .
The split had a skeptical base: in such a senseless world, how could anyone take anything seriously? West's was the idealistic humanitarian's cynical laugh at himself and the world in an attempt to deny his own involvement in an agonizing perception. West mocked those aspects of existence that were most painful to him.

West's attitude is similar to Poe's. Both writers came to the conclusion that the forces of the universe were working against man, and that man's efforts to contend with them will always lead to absurdity; the helplessness of the situation led both writers to the use of irony in their writings in pursuit of a detachment from the chaos that they saw. Irony, for Poe and West, works, therefore, as a preserver of sanity and, at the same time, as a mask to disguise their personal involvement in a pessimistic world. Poe's irony is, nevertheless, more caustic than West's.

In his last letter to John Allan, dated April 12, 1833, Poe reveals his feeling of resentment towards an unjust society:

... If you will only consider in what a situation I am placed you will surely pity me—without friends, without any means, consequently of obtaining employment, I am perishing—absolutely perishing for want of aid. And yet I am not idle—nor addicted to any vice—nor have I committed any offence against society which would render me deserving of so hard a fate. ... [italics mine]

Poe's bitterness toward society, as well as "his disgust with his own weak constitution," and especially his anger against a God who "could have made the world to please
only Himself" (as he seems to imply in Eureka) were sublimated by means of his use of irony. Through irony, Poe reached a detachment, a God-like position that enabled him to mock his readers, the social system, and the forces of nature that entrapped man by trespassing "the border between life and death," distorting the universe, and constructing "a region far more grotesque and monstrous than anything nature provides at its worst." Irony is used by Poe as a tool for fulfilling a personal revenge and as a way of preventing insanity.

Like Poe, West rebelled against the absurdity of the human condition and sought a detachment from it through his use of irony. Unlike Poe, West felt compassion towards man's hopeless struggle to liberate himself from the absurdity of his existence and to find a meaning, an order in the world. In this way, West's "unsympathetic grotesques" are not created because of a "personal animus" but because they were "emblematic of a cancer in the body politic" and of the absurdity of life. "Unlovely" as West's characters are, the reader still cares about them because "he feels that West's indignation is not aroused by his characters but by the system, whether socioeconomic or metaphysical, which creates such characters." West, therefore, reaches a paradoxical position of detachment from and yet involvement in the world; a position that is reflected in one of his anecdotes from his experiences in France:
By the time I got to Paris, the business of being an artist had grown quite difficult. Aside from that fact that you were actually expected to create, the jury had changed. It no longer consisted of the tourists and the folks back home, but of your fellow artists. They were the ones who decided on the authenticity of your madness. Long hair and a rapt look wouldn't get you to first base. You had to have something new on the ball. Even dirt and sandals and calling Sargent a lousy painter was not enough. You had to be an original. Things were a good deal less innocent than they had been, and much more desperate.

When I got to Montparnasse, all the obvious roles had been either dropped or were long played by experts. But I made a lucky hit. Instead of trying strangeness I formalized and exaggerated the costume of a bond salesman. I wore carefully pressed Brooks Brothers clothing, sober but rich ties, and carried gloves and a tightly rolled umbrella. My manners were elaborate and I professed great horror at the slightest breach of the conventional. It was a success. I was asked to all the parties.13

By means of West's "detached self-mockery," the real situation becomes humorous.14 Although it is not quite fair to compare an anecdote with a fictional piece of literature, in "A Predicament," for example, Poe produces a similar effect than that of West's anecdote by the detachment--absurd in this case--of the narrator from the action in which she is caught and which she describes. Poe's narrator, Miss Zenobia, ascends the tower of a cathedral to have a better view of the city; once upstairs, she cannot find a window, only a square opening
through which she thrusts her head. The opening happens to be in the dial-plate of a gigantic clock and one of the steel hands of the "Scythe of Time" cuts her neck. Miss Zenobia describes the horrible and absurd scene with such an exaggerated analytical tone and detachment that it becomes hilarious. The horrible part of her relation in which she loses her eye is one of the most amusing sections:

My eyes, from the cruel pressure of the machine, were absolutely starting from their sockets. While I was thinking how I should possibly manage without them, one actually tumbled out of my head, and, rolling down the steep side of the steeple, lodged in the rain gutter which ran along the eaves of the main building. The loss of the eye was not so much as the insolent air of independence and contempt with which it regarded me after it was out...15

Since the works of Poe and Nathanael West mix pathos and comedy, terror and laughter, the reader is caught in the middle of the tension produced by the yoking of these disparate elements, but at the end, he may reach what Ihab Hassan calls an "ironic catharsis."

Hassan considers that the fiction (like Poe's and West's) that is "neither wholly tragic nor truly comic" has an affinity with the grotesque, which is "pathetic and absurd and terrifying" and which is "a product of the ironic mode." According to Hassan, "As there is a traditional tragic, and perhaps also a comic catharsis," there is also "a distinct ironic catharsis," and this consists of "the

The recognition of absurdity is very obvious in West's novels as well as in Poe's "comic" stories, but not so obvious in Poe's "Gothic" stories. In the Poe's stories where "the comic mode is sustained throughout, the reader is diverted, if not altogether comforted by the exaggerated and self-contained rationality of the narrator who stands between him and the bizarre disruption of order." Poe's Gothic stories, on the other hand, are hoaxes to the narrator and, particularly, to the reader. The narrator of these tales begins his story pretending objectivity or believing that he is being objective, and inviting the reader to observe the action with him from a safe distance. There is a point in the narration--which can be at the beginning of the story--where the narrator's detachment from the action disappears and he enters into the world that he has been describing. The narrator's entering into his nightmarish world may be done with or without his realizing it, and, if he realizes it, he tries not to let the reader see the
change of perspective. If the reader, in spite of the narrator's efforts to confuse him, reaches the authorial perspective, as we saw in the example of "The Black Cat," he is able to achieve the "ironic catharsis" described by Hassan.

Miss Lonelyhearts, perhaps West's best novel, provides a good example of West's use of the grotesque, irony, "irreconcilable conflicts," absurdity, and detachment in a fashion similar to Poe's. The novel is a "portrait of a priest of our time"--as West himself called the main character--struggling to find a pattern of order in a disorderly wasteland.¹⁹ The novel is emblematic of West's black humor techniques and of his own personal philosophy about the meaningless of life.

Distortion, disorder and absurdity are evident from the beginning of Miss Lonelyhearts. First, the reader discovers that Miss Lonelyhearts is not a woman but a man. West purposely does not provide Miss Lonelyhearts' masculine name throughout the novel as an indication of Miss Lonelyhearts' share of the grotesqueness that he sees around him. Miss Lonelyhearts is similar to Poe's "Gothic" narrators who give the reader an exaggerated distortion of the world because of their own psychologically-altered perceptions. Although Miss Lonelyhearts is not the narrator, everything in the novel is seen through his point of view.
The reader learns very soon that "besides being incapable of helping anyone, Miss Lonelyhearts is badly in need of help himself."20

Although the deadline was less than a quarter of an hour away, he was still working on his leader. He had gone as far as: "Life is worth while, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark alter." But he found it impossible to continue. The letters were no longer funny. He could not go on finding the same joke funny thirty times a day for months on end. And on most days he received more than thirty letters, all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering, with a heart-shaped cookie knife.21

Narrative irony is also evident in the novel. "The dough of suffering, with a heart-shaped cookie knife" or "the Miss Lonelyhearts of the New York Post-Dispatch (Are you in trouble? — Do-you-need-advice? — Write-to-Miss-Lonelyhearts-and-she-will-help-you)" (ML, p. 1), for instance, made it clear that the reader is not being presented with a conventional tragedy, on the other hand, the tragedies of Miss Lonelyhearts' correspondents and of Miss Lonelyhearts himself make clear that the novel is not a conventional comedy either. West's technique is similar to Poe's when the latter uses not-so-serious or poetic phrases like "the water-lilies shrieked within their beds--and the forest crumbled before the wind--and the thunder rolled--and the lightning fell--and the rock rocked to its foundation" in an apparently "lyrical," philosophical and "serious" piece of writing such as "Silence."22
The incongruities and the mixture of pathos and comedy reach their peak in the letters directed to Miss Lonelyhearts. Perhaps the most pathetic, and yet "absurdly ludicrous" letter is the one written by "Desperate":

I am sixteen years old now and I dont know what to do and would appreciate it if you could tell me what to do. When I was a little girl it was not so bad because I got used to the kids on the block makeing fun of me, but now I would like to have boy friends like the other girls and go out on Saturday nites, but no boy will take me because I was born without a nose--though I am a good dancer and have a nice shape and my father buys me pretty clothes.

I sit and look at myself all day and cry. I have a big hole in the middle of my face that scares people even myself so I cant blame the boys for not wanting to take me out. My mother loves me, but she crys terrible when she looks at me.

What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate? Even if I did do some bad things I didnt do any before I was a year old and I was born this way. I asked Papa and he says he doesnt know, but that maybe I did something in the other world before I was born or that maybe I was being punished for his sins. I dont believe that because he is a very nice man. Ought I commit suicide?

The humor of the letter comes from the use of mis-spelled words, poor grammar, "inarticulate groping of words," from the "naive final question" and from the use of the pseudonym, and yet, as Victor Comerchero remarks, "the reader does not laugh, or if he does, it is not with complete comfort" because only "the expression" of the problem
is funny, not the problem itself. Like West, Poe is rarely amusing because his humor is entangled with morbidity.

Miss Lonelyhearts' tragedy does have a humorous touch, too; he accepted the job in the newspaper as "a joke," but the joke got to him, as he explains to Betty:

... A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke. He welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column, and anyway he's tired of being a leg man. He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator. (ML, p. 32)

Although Miss Lonelyhearts feels that "all order is doomed," he also feels that "the battle is worth while" (ML, p. 31). He believes that the only plausible reason that he can give to his readers to keep them "in the battle" is God; however, he has his personal doubt about God. He wants to believe in God, but feels, on the other hand, that if God exists, He should have manifested "the higher order which governs man's existence." Miss Lonelyhearts' struggle is, therefore, in search for faith and grace to accept the unacceptable. "If he could only believe in Christ," he thinks,
"then everything would be simple and the letters extremely easy to answer" (ML, p. 26).

The natural innocence that Betty offers Miss Lonelyhearts as a solution for his despair provides him with a temporary relief only. The vision of the world that Betty offers him excludes the suffering and the spiritual needs which are inherent parts of the human condition. Betty's vision of the world is too simple, too limited, and too childish for Miss Lonelyhearts who is aware that "violence and suffering exist in the real universe," and that any "harmony" which eliminates these elements is, therefore, false.26

Although Miss Lonelyhearts realizes that God is the only answer for the letters, he first tries "to stay away from the Christ business" because he does not want "to get sick" (ML, p. 3). In an attempt to forget his problem he tries "hot water, whisky, coffee, exercise" and sex (ML, p. 19). He goes out on a teasing date with Mary Shrike, then on a "field trip" with Fay Doyle, and on a trip to the countryside with Betty; but nothing helps him. The words of the emotionless Shrike become true:

... neither the soil, nor the South Seas, nor Hedonism, nor art, nor suicide, nor drugs, can mean anything to us. We are not men who swallow camels only to strain the stools. God alone is our escape. The church is our only hope, the First Church of Christ Dentist, where He is worshipped as Preventer of Decay. The church whose symbol is the trinity newstyle: Father, Son and Wirehaired Fox Terrier... (ML p. 35)
Miss Lonelyhearts finally accepts that he is "capable of dreaming the Christ dream," but that his problem is his "lack of humility" (ML, p. 39). He soon has the opportunity of developing his humility when he meets the cripple husband of Fay Doyle, Peter. Peter Doyle is "a walking manifestation of the disorder and misrule implicit in a world of flux," "a Miss Lonelyhearts letter in the flesh."27

Doyle meets Miss Lonelyhearts and is so excited that he cannot talk; he prefers to give Miss Lonelyhearts a letter in which he tells him about his personal tragedy;

While Miss Lonelyhearts was puzzling out the crabbed writing, Doyle's damp hand accidentally touched his under the table. He jerked away, but drove his hand back and forced it to clasp the cripple's. After finishing the letter, he did not let go, but pressed it firmly with all the love he could manage. . . . (ML, p. 47)

The fact that Miss Lonelyhearts forces himself to overcome the revulsion he feels at holding Doyle's hand represents the first step to his religious conversion. He starts feeling identified with the suffering of his correspondents. He later accepts not only the suffering, but also the grotesqueness and animality of Doyle, and, therefore, of himself and of all humanity when he holds hands with the cripple for a second time.

Miss Lonelyhearts goes to Doyle's house for dinner, and Mrs. Doyle starts winking at him in front of her husband. Doyle becomes uncomfortable and remarks, "'Ain't I
the pimp, to bring home a guy for my wife?" (ML, p. 48).

Doyle's words infuriate Fay who rolls a newspaper and hits her husband in the mouth.

He surprised her by playing the fool. He growled like a dog and caught the paper in his teeth. When she let go of her end, he dropped to his hands and knees and continued the imitation on the floor.

Miss Lonelyhearts tried to get the cripple to stand up and bent to lift him; but as he did so, Doyle tore open Miss Lonelyheart's fly, then rolled over on his back, laughing wildly. (ML, p. 48)

The grotesque scene does not appear to shock anybody. Mrs. Doyle kicks her husband, and the three of them return to their seats while Miss Lonelyhearts starts thinking of "a message" to deliver to the couple (ML, p. 48).

After a while Fay goes to the kitchen and Miss Lonelyhearts takes the opportunity to smile at Doyle; the cripple returns the smile and offers him his hand; Miss Lonelyhearts clasps it, and they remain smiling and holding hands until Mrs. Doyle re-enters and cries: 'What a sweet pair of fairies you guys are' (ML, p. 49). After this, Miss Lonelyhearts delivers the Doyles a hysterical message about Christ, Fay gets rid of her husband and attempts to seduce Miss Lonelyhearts who, in return, hits her and runs away from the house.

Ironically, Miss Lonelyhearts' conversion is now accomplished; he becomes "a rock"--Peter, "the rock on which the new church will be founded." His "rock state" allows
him to stay naked in front of five people without feeling ashamed, to stand Shrike's ironic remarks without being disturbed, to beg "the party dress"--Betty--to marry him and to tell her all the things that she expected to hear (ML, pp. 51-56). He had reached a state in which "He did not feel guilty. He did not feel. The rock was a solidification of his feeling, his conscience, his sense of reality, his self-knowledge" (ML, p. 56).

The next day, Miss Lonelyhearts wakes up with fever and the rock becomes "a furnace" (ML, p. 56). "'Christ! Christ!'" he shouts and this shout echoes "through the innermost cells of his body" (ML, p. 57). The room is "full of grace" now (ML, p. 57).

Miss Lonelyhearts' conversion is obviously the product of "the illusory grace of madness."28 Ironically, it is in his "rock state" that Miss Lonelyhearts is more vulnerable. Fay has told her husband that Miss Lonelyhearts tried to rape her, and Doyle comes up the stairs of Miss Lonelyhearts' apartment carrying a gun. Miss Lonelyhearts thanks God for sending Doyle so that he could "perform a miracle and be certain of his conversion" (ML, p. 57). In his delirium, Miss Lonelyhearts embraces Doyle, who shouts and warns him,

... but Miss Lonelyhearts continued his charge. He did not understand the cripple's shout and heard it as a cry for help from Desperate, Harold S. Catholic-mother, Broken-
hearted, Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband. He was running to succor them with love. (ML pp. 57-58)

Unable to escape Miss Lonelyhearts' embrace and terrified by Betty's coming up the stairs, Doyle accidentally shoots the gun and kills Miss Lonelyhearts. Once again Miss Lonelyhearts becomes the victim of a terrible joke perpetrated by an indifferent God (or author) who did not care about his religious conversion or his suffering. The fact that he is another innocent victim, like the ones of his letters, gives his struggle and death a certain heroic quality. Miss Lonelyhearts was trapped in a universe that, ultimately, lacked a discernible order. He thinks that he has found Christ and, ironically, becomes a Christ figure but only on a physical level because his death does not have any significant spiritual implication. Shrike's words about God being "the Miss Lonelyhearts of Miss Lonelyhearts" become ironically and tragically real. As Miss Lonelyhearts does not know how to answer his correspondents' letters, so does God with Miss Lonelyhearts' letter to Him.

Critics such as Hyman and Comerchero see homosexual overtones in Miss Lonelyhearts' relationship to Doyle and in his "religious" conversion. Although denied by other critics like Thomas Jackson, the possibility of Miss Lonelyhearts' homosexuality seems to be well-sustained throughout the novel and, if that was the intention of the author, it
adds a much more pathetic and, at the same time, comic
touch to the book.

Miss Lonelyhearts' sensibility and weak constitution
make him psychologically a woman. The "female impersonator"
of Miss Lonelyhearts is, therefore, a woman--psychologi-
cally--who has to "imitate a man imitating a woman." If
Miss Lonelyhearts is a latent homosexual, it is easier to
explain the numerous phallic symbols that surround him
throughout the novel, also his acceptance of "teasing dates"
with Mary and how thinking about Mary's excitement he re-
fects that "No similar change ever took place in his own
body, however. Like a dead man, only friction could make
him warm or violence make him mobile" (ML, p. 19). His
homosexuality explains, too, his apathy towards Betty and his
pleasant sensation when he is being seduced by Fay: "He had
always been the pursuer, but now found a strange pleasure in
having the roles reversed" (ML, p. 28), and also his becom-
ing "physically sick" after he makes love to her, or rather
after she makes love to him (ML, p. 30). His holding hands
with Doyle represents, therefore, his conversion, not reli-
gious, but from latent to overt homosexuality. The conver-
sion is, nevertheless, only unconscious because he thinks
that it is, in fact, religious. As Hyman remarks, "It is
West's ultimate irony that the symbolic embrace they [Miss
Lonelyhearts and Doyle] manage at the end is one penetrating
the body of the other with a bullet."
Whether Miss Lonelyhearts is a homosexual or not, the conclusion of the novel is the same: life is absurd and terrible and there is "no religious redemption to be found in human weakness, no transfiguring sense of good-and-evil, no compensation in the physical life."31

Miss Lonelyhearts, and all of the main characters in West's novels, is the victim of forces beyond his control. The forces that West's characters encounter are the same that Poe's narrators face: forces that are part of the flux of the universe, forces of nature, forces that dominate their minds. The confrontation of West's and Poe's characters with these forces is generally lost before it starts.

Some of the characteristics that are generally associated with black humor are found not only in West's work, but also in Poe's. As in black humor, the effects of West's and Poe's works are achieved "by playing with our involvement with the work and shifting our distance from it"; this disorientation of the reader can be accomplished by rapidly alternating between blackness and humor, threat and amusement, horror and farce or by combining these "extremes" in such a way that the reader cannot respond to either one separately. Black humor may present what appears to be impossible and assure the reader that what he sees is true. "Its world is often bizarre and surrealistic; motivation and causality are unclear; characters are alienated from us; normality is lost: realistic details, however, are presented
with extreme clarity...." The reader's distance from the characters is continually changed in black humor:

Often we are made to laugh at a character, then suddenly to recognize that we share his dilemma and therefore have been laughing at ourselves all along. . . . Once this recognition takes place, the laughter has to stop. But black humor keeps shifting the perspective, so that its characters act in a ridiculous fashion when we are prepared to sympathize with them and become serious when we wish to laugh. Neither we nor the characters are ever on a firm foundation.32

James F. Light considers that the prevailing humor of Miss Lonelyhearts is "grotesque black humor." Grotesque black humor—the prevailing humor not only of Miss Lonelyhearts, but also of many of Poe's works—emphasizes "the blackness of black humor," which is "rooted in total despair, sees the universe as absurd, and often uses violent and shocking images or surrealistic images yoking disparate concepts to destroy the complacency of its audience."33 Among the characters of West's novel, the emotionless and nihilistic Shrike is the perfect embodiment of the tone of grotesque black humor.

In his notes on Miss Lonelyhearts, West mentions that "Lyric novels can be written according to Poe's definition of a lyric poem."34 West's remark proves that he not only read Poe, but also was influenced by some of Poe's ideas. Poe inspired West directly and indirectly through the artistic movements that West found in France and which Poe had also influenced. West not only uses some of Poe's
techniques, but also shares some of this ideas about the universe and about man's position in it; both writers were skeptical and their works reflect an existential approach to life. Both writers use the grotesque for comic purposes and as emblematic of the disorder they saw in the world; both yoke pathos and comedy, and both were catalysts for later black humor fiction. Poe and West laughed at what they took most seriously: the tragedy of man and their own tragedy; their attitude can be summarized by the words of John Gilson, one of the characters of West's surrealist first novel, The Dream Life of Balso Snell, who says:

An intelligent man finds it easy to laugh at himself, but his laughter is not sincere if it is thorough. If I could be Hamlet, or even a clown with a breaking heart 'neath his jester's motley, the role would be tolerable. But I always find it necessary to burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source; I must laugh at myself, and if the laugh is "bitter," I must laugh at the laugh. The ritual of feeling demands burlesque and, whether the burlesque is successful or not, a laugh...
CHAPTER V

POE AND JOSEPH HELLER'S CATCH-22

Since its first publication in 1961, Joseph Heller's Catch-22 has sold more than eight million copies. It is now considered a contemporary classic and, according to critics such as Morris Dickstein, "the best novel of the sixties."¹ Heller's novel belongs to the tradition of the "Theatre of the Absurd" and is one of the best examples of black humor fiction. Heller—using more flexible techniques—accomplishes many effects originally exploited in America by the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe and shares some of Poe's metaphysical ideas and attitudes toward mankind and society. Moreover, the picaresque-like adventures of Yossarian, his constant encounters with death, and his journey into the soul have some similarities to Pym's in Poe's The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym.

Although some people insist on considering Catch-22 a war novel or a novel against the Establishment, Heller's book goes much more further than that because World War II and the island of Pianosa are used as metaphors of the whole tragedy of the human condition and of man's role in a chaotic world. Heller, like Poe, depicts the universe as malevolent, as a plot against man. Yossarian's struggle is, therefore, a struggle for the affirmation or the survival of the
self in a destructive world. In this way, Heller empha-
sizes the threat against Yossarian's life does not come from
only one source; Yossarian's enemies are everywhere, or at
least he feels that way:

There were too many dangers for Yossarian
to keep track of. There was Hitler, Mussoli-
ni and Tojo, for example, and they were all out to kill him. There was Lieutenant Scheis-
skopf with his fanaticism for parades and
there was the bloated colonel with his big fat
mustache and his fanaticism for retribution,
and they wanted to kill him, too. There was
Appleby, Havermeyer, Black and Korn. There
was Nurse Cramer and Nurse Duckett, who he
was almost certain wanted him dead, and there
was the Texan and the C.I.D. man, about whom
he had no doubt. There were bartenders,
bricklayers and bus conductors all over the
world who wanted him dead, landlords and ten-
ants, traitors and patriots, lynchers, leeches
and lackeys, and they were all out to bump
him off. That was the secret Snowden had
spilled to him on the mission to Avignon--
they were out to get him; and Snowden had
spilled it all over the back of the plane.

There were lymph glands that might do him
in. There were kidneys, nerve sheaths and
corpuscles. There were tumors of the brain.
There was Hodgkin's disease, leukemia, amyto-
trophic lateral sclerosis. There were fer-
tile red meadows of epithelial tissue to catch
and coddle a cancer cell. There were dis-
eases of the skin, diseases of the bone,
diseases of the lung, diseases of the stomach,
diseases of the heart, blood and arteries.
There were diseases of the head, diseases of
the neck, diseases of the chest, diseases of
the intestines, diseases of the crotch. There
even were diseases of the feet. There were
billions of conscientious body cells oxidat-
ing away day and night like dumb animals at
their complicated job of keeping him alive and
healthy, and everyone was a potential traitor
and foe. There was so many diseases that it
took a truly diseased mind to even think about
them as he and Hungry Joe did.
The scene in which Yossarian is in the plane with Snowden—whose name may mean "snowed-in"—suggests another threat to Yossarian's life, "the terror of frozen entrapment, life ebbing away in preternatural cold." The motifs of snow and entrapment are also very important in Poe's Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. Yossarian's hopeless condition of entrapment is epitomized in "catch-22," the absurd rule that governs his world:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle. (p. 47)

Even at the end, when Yossarian runs away from Pianosa, the threat of Nately's whore is close by. The "catch" is cosmic; Yossarian's world is a gigantic catch-22. The "military" catch-22 grows like a cancer in front of Yossarian's eyes.

Heller uses chapter thirty-nine, "The Eternal City," to emphasize the universality of catch-22. The word "eternal" in the title of the chapter, helps to create the idea of the cosmic proportions of the evil that Yossarian
witnesses in Rome. Rome is the cradle of Western civilization, and the fact that Rome has become a city of horrors means that all our Western civilization contains the germ of evil. Using surrealistic effects, in "The Eternal City," Heller "leaves comedy altogether" and depicts "an eerie nightmare of terror." Yossarian's journey along the dark streets of Rome and his facing of all the squalor scattered throughout the city can be seen as a descent into Hell comparable to those of Odysseus and Dante.

Heller sets the book on an off-shore island and uses Pianosa as a microcosm and, significantly, makes his characters pilots. World War II is used as a frame to "intensify the incongruities and absurdities" of ordinary life and to cast "an apocalyptic shadow over the book." Death insistently appears in Heller's novel "as an affront, a joke in bad taste and one that is omnipresent"; it is used "not simply to demonstrate the follies of war, but even more pessimistically to question the whole point of human existence."

The world encountered by the narrators of Poe's stories is as threatening as Yossarian's and beyond man's control or understanding. Just to give an example, in "The Pit and the Pendulum" the prisoner's life is as threatened as Yossarian's. The narrator of Poe's story is put inside an intensively dark cell where he has to struggle, first against losing his mind, and then to save his life from the blade of a gigantic pendulum, the mysterious abyss of a pit, the
burning heat of the cell walls and finally the threat of the sudden closing in movement of the walls; ". . . as the walls begin to close in, he realizes that he had been destined by the tormentors for the pit in the first place . . . and that all his luck, all his cunning, and all his regained ration- ality have ironically trapped him into self-torment and increased his agony."7 Nevertheless, all of a sudden the walls stop their movement and the prisoner's life is spared. The main irony of Poe's story resides in that the prisoner's life is determined by "a rescue from outside that comes unexpectedly, independently, unconnected with his own personal fate at the last moment of his despair and defeat." The story is, therefore, a dramatization of the "futile efforts of man's will to survive the malevolent perversity of the world and to make order out of chaos."8 The theme of nothingness that concerned Poe so much is very important in "The Pit and the Pendulum." When the prisoner is left in the dungeon, he recovers his consciousness but is afraid to open his eyes, "I longed, yet dared not to employ by vision . . . . It was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be nothing to see," he says.9 The same theme is used also in the first paragraph of the story when

... the figures of the judges vanished, as if magically, from me; the tall candles sank into nothingness; their flames went out utterly; the blackness of darkness supervened; all sensations appeared swallowed up in a mad rushing descent as of the soul into Hades.
Then silence, and stillness, and night were the universe. (p. 682)

The threat that leads the prisoner to lose his hope and strength is the threat of the "... unknown yet half-known nothingness, lurking at the bottom of the pit (like the darkness over the waters in Genesis)."

When the prisoner was sentenced by the judges, he sees them "fashion" the syllables of his name, but he shudders "because no sound succeeded" (p. 681). G.R. Thompson explains that "the symbolic significance of a death sentence pronounced on a victim, the pronunciation of whose name by the judges yields no sound, can hardly be other than the theme of nothingness."

The world and the universe are represented by both Poe and Heller as a combination of forces attempting to destroy man's life and challenging man's understanding and, therefore, his sanity. Yossarian's discovery that "man is matter" (p. 450) appalls him as much as the threat of nothingness appalls Poe's narrator in "The Pit and the Pendulum." Poe and Heller reflect in their works the fear of man's "regressing toward the inert or inanimate, and the fear that the power which rules us is really some inexplicable, abstract Conspiracy." Both writers convey the experience of catastrophe in their fiction.

In their universe, Poe's and Heller's characters find no religious support. They are alone. The God
depicted by both writers is a God that does not really care about man's fate. Poe's God encompasses the threat of noth-
ingness. Yossarian's God, on the other hand, is unjust be-
cause He included disease, pain and death in His Creation. 13

"And don't tell me God works in mysterious ways," Yossarian continued, hurtling on over her [Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife's] objection.

"There's nothing so mysterious about it. He's not working at all. He's playing. Or else He's forgotten all about us. That's the kind of God you people talk about—a country bumpkin, a clumsy, bungling, brainless, conceited, uncouth hayseed. Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation? What in the world was running through that warped, evil, escatolo-
gical mind of His when He robbed old people of the power to control their bowel movements? Why in the world did He ever create pain?"

"Pain?" Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife pounced upon the word victoriously. "Pain is a useful symptom. Pain is a warning to us of bodily dangers."

"And who created the dangers?" Yossarian demanded. He laughed caustically. "Oh, He was really being charitable to us when He gave us pain! Why couldn't He have used a doorbell instead to notify us, or one of his celestial choirs? Or a system of blue-and-red neon tubes right in the middle of each person's forehead. Any jukebox manufacturer worth his salt could have done that. Why couldn't He?... "What a colossal, immortal blunderer! When you con-
sider the opportunity and power He had to really do a job, and then look at the stupid, ugly little mess He made of it instead, His sheer incompetence is almost staggering. It's obvi-
ous He never met a payroll. Why, no self-respecting businessman would hire a bungler like Him as even a shipping clerk!"...
"Isn't he punishing me enough?" Yossarian snorted resentfully. "You know, we mustn't let Him get away with it. Oh, no, we certainly mustn't let Him get away scot free for all the sorrow He's caused us. Someday I'm going to make Him pay. I know when. On the Judgment Day. Yes, that's the day I'll be close enough to reach out and grab that little yokel by His neck. . . ." (pp. 184-185)

Poe and Heller reflect some existential ideas in their works. Their characters are aware of their limitations in dealing with a meaningless world and an incomprehensible universe. The awareness of the chaos surrounding them and of their handicap in dealing with it produces in the characters feelings of anxiety and, in some cases, leads them to despair. Moreover, the experiences that the characters undergo are endured by themselves alone without receiving much help from anybody else. In Catch-22, Yossarian receives some help from the chaplain and from Danby at the end of the book, but before that he is considered crazy and a troublemaker by most of the people, especially his commanding officers. Major Sanderson, for instance, considers him "a manic-depressive" because Yossarian is "antagonistic to the idea of being robbed, exploited, degraded, humiliated or deceived," and because he is depressed by ignorance, persecution, violence, slums, greed, crime and corruption (p. 312). Yossarian's escape at the end is presented as his only alternative to protect himself from insanity; nevertheless, Yossarian's turning his back to his world will lead him to a lonely life.
In Heller's *Catch-22* and in Poe's fiction, all the events are filtered through the mind of only one character. Poe's stories are told by his "I" narrators who use the telling of their experiences for cathartic purposes—for example the narrators of "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "A Descent into the Maelstrom"—or to fool the readers and make them pay for the frustration that the narrators have suffered—for instance, the narrators of "The Black Cat" and "The Premature Burial." Heller, on the other hand, uses multiple points of view in *Catch-22*, but all the events are unified by Yossarian's consciousness. Heller's narrative method is a "modified or objectified stream of consciousness." The time sequence in *Catch-22* is, therefore psychological. The appearance and reappearance of people, things, and events produce a spiral effect on the novel's form.

The significance of both Poe's and Heller's characters' experiences is measured on a personal basis; the characters' experiences do not have much social implications inside the stories; they have primarily a psychological value. Yossarian's decision to run away, for instance, does bring about a change in the chaplain's attitude and even in Danby's; nevertheless, the process undergone by Yossarian's mind to reach that decision is what ties up all the events that take place in the novel and makes the time sequence of the book meaningful. The ending of *Catch-22* is seen as
an affirmation of Yossarian's self, as his rebirth. Yossarian recognizes that his is a chaotic world and refuses to be a part of it; he takes the position of a Romantic Ironist and decides to laugh at his world by leaving it behind following Orr's example, "'Let the bastards thrive, for all I care, since I can't do a thing to stop them but embarrass them by running away. I've got responsibilities of my own . . .'" (p. 462), he tells Danby. Yossarian's decision of turning his back on Pianosa makes him feel a little bit selfish, and he decides to take Nately's whore's kid sister with him, "if he can find her." He tells the chaplain and Danby, "'I'll take her to Sweden with me if I can find her, so it isn't all selfish, is it?'" (p. 462)

Yossarian's attitude of detaching himself from his chaotic world and to "embarrass" his superior officers is similar to the attitude taken by Poe and Heller. Both writers reflect their consciousness of the chaos of the world, and, at the same time, their vision of transcendent evil is so horrifying that both of them seemed to have found a release from it by means of laughter. The works of both writers, therefore, have a violent mixture of horror and comedy.

Heller's *Catch-22* and Poe's tales reflect the distrust that both writers felt towards man's capacity to understand his world by means of his reason. Both writers' characters are unable to reach an understanding of the chaos that surrounds them. The narrators of Poe's "Gothic"
stories, for instance, generally present their experiences as unexplained "wonders" or simply give the "facts" and leave the challenge of explaining them to the reader; this happens, for instance, in "Ligeia," "Morella," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "M.S. Found in a Bottle," as well as in other stories.

In Catch-22, Yossarian does not understand the absurdity that governs his world; moreover, he wants to believe that Catch-22 does not exist:

Catch-22 did not exist, he was positive of that, but it made no difference. What did matter was that everyone thought it existed, and that was much worse, for there was no object or text to ridicule or refute, to accuse, criticize, attack, amend, hate, revile, spit at, rip to shreds, trample upon or burn up. (. 418)

If everyone but Yossarian believes in the existence of Catch-22, it means that Catch-22, in fact, is the governing rule of Yossarian's world. Catch-22 is beyond Yossarian's understanding; he is therefore, handicapped to deal with it (after all, he has "a liver condition"). Yossarian's lack of perception in regards to Orr's scheme reveals, also, that he is not completely able to understand what happens around him. Another example of Heller's depiction of man's inability to reach a full understanding of his world is the chaplain and his attempt to explain the things that he does not understand by applying his theory of déjà vu, presque vu,
and *jamais vu*. The chaplain's confusion between reality and illusion is complete:

It was possible that there were other *vus* of which he had never heard and that one of these other *vus* would explain succinctly the baffling phenomenon of which he had been both a witness and a part; it was even possible that none of what he thought had taken place, really had taken place, that he was dealing with an aberration of memory rather than of perception, that he never really had thought he had seen what he now thought he once did think he had seen, that his impression now that he once had thought so was merely the *illusion* of an illusion. . . . (p. 276)

Both Poe and Heller make their readers actually feel the inadequacy of their own rational ability, and both writers laugh at their readers' effort of putting together the information that they give them. Poe's narrators, for instance, are generally unreliable; they hide information from the reader (as in the Tales of Ratiocination), "arrange" their accounts of their experiences so that the reader can believe their words (as we saw in "The Black Cat") or mislead the reader by giving him a psychologically biased report (as in "The Fall of the House of Usher") or a distorted report due to their dream-like or hallucinated states (as in "Ligeia"). To reach the authorial position, Poe's reader has to be as aware as his M. Dupin, or, at least, be able to reason well" as his Minister D__ is in "The Purloined Letter" whose reasoning ability comes from his being "poet and mathematician."16
In *Catch-22*, Heller confuses the reader's sense of order and expectation and makes him have as many doubts about reality as Yossarian or the chaplain had. The reader, in fact, is led into an actual *déjà vu* experience. Heller confuses the reader by not following a chronological flow of the action, but rather "a cyclic pattern of continually repeated events."\(^{17}\) Heller, for instance, makes a statement about some event that has taken place in the past and purposely omits the clarification that the statement demands. In this way, many important events in the novel are referred to several times, often in increasing detail, before the reader is given a complete account of them.\(^{18}\) There are, for example, several partial accounts of Snowden's death, but it is not until chapter forty-one that the reader knows all the relevant details about it and how it affected Yossarian. Another example is Milo's bombing of his own squadron, which is mentioned twice before we are given the complete account of it. These partial accounts of certain events give the novel a touch of mystery. At the end, the reader is supposed to have solved the mystery of these events, and particularly Snowden's death and Orr's disappearance and to realize why these two events are so important for Yossarian.

Another device used by Heller in order to confuse the reader's mind is the presentation of "two apparently contradictory statements about the same event before providing a clarification."\(^{19}\) For example, on page 29, Doc Daneeka tells
Yossarian that he was drafted "just as the shop was finally starting to show a profit." However, on page 41, he says that "fortunately, just when things were blackest, the war broke out." Finally, eleven pages later, the full explanation is provided: "'Fifty grand a year I was knocking down, and almost all of it tax free. . . . And look what happened. Just when I was all set to really start stashing it away, they had to manufacture fascism and start a war horrible enough to affect even me'" (p. 52). The war had initially been good for Doc Daneeka's business, but his having been drafted prevented him from profiting from it as much as he would have liked.

Also, Heller sometimes provides contradictory accounts of an event and does not give a solution to it, leaving the reader confused and, in some instances, asking the reader "to believe the incredible." The C.I.D. man, for example, is supposed to have caught a cold from the fighter captain, who as we are told, did not have a cold. Also, Milo's claiming that he did not direct the anti-craft fire upon his own planes and then that he did it.20

Heller not only confuses the reader about the time and nature of the events that take place in the novel, but also shocks him by assuming attitudes opposite to the ones expected by the reader. By introducing these unexpected attitudes in a casual way, Heller "not only challenges the traditional value system but suggests through his tone that
nothing unusual is being said, thus doubling the shock ef-
fect."21 "In a way the C.I.D. man was pretty lucky," we are
told, "because outside the hospital the war was still going
on. Men went mad and were rewarded with medals" (p. 16).
We are told also that "the Texan turned out to be good-
natured, generous and likeable. In three days no one could
stand him" (p. 10).

Heller's method of characterization is equally de-
ceitful. Most of Heller's characters

... are introduced to us in deceptively ex-
planatory paragraphs which appear to sum up
their personalities in a few adjectives, but
which provide the reader with irreconcilably
opposite traits. ... Gradually the charac-
ters become increasingly absurd as the per-
sonality traits of each one are seen to be one,
an obsession.22

Milo, for example, is described as a man with

... a simple, sincere face that was inca-
pable of subtlety or guile, an honest, frank
face with disunited large eyes, rusty hair,
black eyebrows and an unfortunate reddish-
brown mustache. ... It was the face of a
man of hardened integrity who could no more
consciously violate the moral principles on
which his virtue rested than he could trans-
form himself into a despicable toad. One of
these moral principles was that it was never
a sin to charge as much as the traffic could
bear. He was capable of mighty paroxysms of
righteous indignation. ... (pp. 65-66)

By the end of the book, nevertheless, Milo's "moral
principles" had helped him to manipulate the operations of
M&M and to endanger the lives of his own men for profit.

Most of Heller's characters in Catch-22 are carica-
tures who have illusory views of the world which, in turn,
isolate them and make the results of their actions contrary to their expectations. Each character is,

in his way, the unaware individual who believes that he can operate the world as he imagines it and that his actions can achieve their purpose. So Hungry Joe devotes his life to taking pictures which never come out, Scheisskopf to conducting parades, Major Major to avoiding everyone.23

Heller's characters are not that different from Poe's obsessed, caricature-like characters. Heller's characters can be compared, for instance, to the narrator of "The Man of the Crowd" who spends the whole night roaming through the streets following an old man who goes from one crowded place to another, or the narrator of "The Man That Was Used Up" whose curiosity and obsession with the Brigadier's figure sends him on a disappointing journey, or to the victim of "The Imp of the Perverse."

Another device employed by Heller to confuse the reader and suggest an irrational world is his use of "apparent logic" to destroy sense. The reader, thus can be presented an argument which seems to progress in a logical way, but which leads to an absurd conclusion. Such is the case, for example, of Yossarian's argument with Luciana about their getting married (pp. 163-164) or Clevinger's trial (p. ??). Also individual sentences which appear to be absurd turn out to be logical. For example, "'I didn't know there were any other Captain Yossarians. As far as I know, I'm the only Captain Yossarian I know but that's only as far as I know'" (p. 13). The opposite device is also used by
Heller and, thus, he gives us sentences which have a tone and a structure that suggest meaning, but that, in fact, have no logical sense. For example: "The men knew he was a C.I.D. man because he confided to them he was and urged each of them not to reveal his true identity to any of the other men to whom he had already confided that he was a C.I.D. man" (p. 96).

Sentence structure is also used by Heller throughout *Catch-22* to confuse the reader about the characters and events and to produce the impression of an irrational world. The novel is, therefore, "full of complex sentences in which the individual clauses and phrases are not related to each other or are related at a tangent. . . . As the sentence progresses each new clause or phrase does not clarify what has gone before but adds new complications." Such is the case of a sentence like:

The men could pick up girls along that road if they promised to take them where they wanted to go, buxom, young, homely, grinning girls with missing teeth whom they could drive off the road and lie down in the wild grass with, and Yossarian did whenever he could, which was not nearly as often as Hungry Joe, who could get a jeep but couldn't drive, begged him to try. (p. 26)

Although the reader of *Catch-22* imaginatively shares Yossarian's experiences, he remains outside of the novel's world. The style, the tone, the narrative techniques, and the methods of characterization of *Catch-22* are used to frustrate the reader's expectations. The success of each of
the deceiving techniques exploited by Heller, according to Jean Kennard, depends upon "a pre-conception of the reader that the novel tells a story, is peopled with recognizably human beings and is written in a style which justifies Ian Watt's claim [in The Rise of the Novel. Berkeley: 1964, p.30] that 'the function of language is much more referential in the novel than in other literary forms.'" 26

The reader of a novel expects to receive a report of a human experience; he expects "to be drawn into the world of the novel." The reader of Catch-22 is initially given "familiar situations" to make him feel that he is on solid ground; however, later on the reader's expectations are undermined and he is practically expelled from the novel's world.

The novel itself becomes an object which provides the reader with the experience of the absurd... After attempting to relate his preconceptions about novels, his "illusions" about the form, to this novel, the reader is finally stripped of them. Catch-22 simultaneously shows man's illusory view of the world, employs techniques to suggest the irrational nature of the world and is itself an object against which the truth of its statements may be tested.27

Poe's methods are not as bold as Heller's; Poe is more orthodox in his narrative techniques and, for instance, follows a chronological flow of events. Nevertheless, Poe's readers are as deceived as Heller's. Poe's and Heller's readers actually become "objectified" by the writers since they are laughed at throughout the stories and the novel.
By laughing at the expense of their readers, both writers remained detached from their works, or in control of them, and assume a superior, god-like, position; the position of detachment sought by the Romantic Ironists. Poe and Heller share Yossarian's attitude of laughing at the chaos of the world and of the human condition as a means of preserving their sanity. Their detachment is, therefore, a self-protective measure. Heller and Poe not only detach themselves as participants of their chaotic world, but also attack it from the distance. Heller, for instance, uses the humor of Catch-22 not as "the gentle entertainment of comedy" but as "the harsh derision and directed social attack of satire." Heller's characters, as we already mentioned, become caricatures, and each one becomes associated with that aspect of civilization which the author intends to attack and all of them together embrace a wide range of attitudes and social levels. James Nagel considers that "the normative values of Heller's satire are essentially opposed to war, capitalism, bureaucracy, and traditional religion, and in favor of freedom, peace, agnosticism, sex, and life."^28

Poe and Heller seem to have a nihilistic vision of the world and the universe. Both writers have skeptical attitudes about God. Both see man as basically alone in his attempt to survive and understand the universe, the world, and himself. Both consider that man's only help in his
quest for reaching an understanding of his world is his rational ability; nevertheless, reason can sometimes confuse and trick him. The consciousness of transcendent evil and of the hopelessness of his human condition is a very heavy weight for man to carry. Through laughter man can alleviate the tension and anxiety that his consciousness produces in him. Laughter is, thus, used by Poe and Heller as a medicine to prevent insanity.

The same detachment that Poe and Heller keep from their works is demanded from their readers. Poe's reader has to analyze and measure objectively the narrator's words to be able to reach the authorial position and laugh. Heller's reader has to reach the end of the book to see it in perspective and organize it chronologically to achieve a better understanding of some of the events that were partially mentioned before the end and to see the proper relationships among them.
CHAPTER VI

POE AND THOMAS PYNCHON'S V.

The loneliness and anxiety experienced by man after he realizes his position in the middle of a chaotic universe, and his frustrated attempts to make order out of confusion are the major themes of Edgar Allan Poe's fiction which are treated by him with an ironic detachment or authorial self-consciousness similar to the one sought by the German Romantic Ironists of the early nineteenth century. Nathanael West and Joseph Heller use these same themes and treat them with the same ironic detachment that Poe accomplishes in his tales. The fiction of Thomas Pynchon, too, depicts man's unsuccessful efforts to understand an incomprehensible chaos around him. The ironic treatment of the material that he presents and the distance that he maintains from his works reflect Pynchon's reluctance to be considered a participant of the chaos that he describes; a reluctance shared with Poe, West, and Heller. Thomas Pynchon's first novel, V. (1963), presents these themes in a fashion similar to Poe's and, moreover, contains passages and symbols that echo specific works by Poe, such as The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, "The Masque of the Red Death," and "The Man That Was Used Up."
Chaos is presented in *V* in the form of entropy or the unavoidable fact that the world is running into inanimateness. Each situation presented in the novel is used to reveal an aspect of decay, a "move further into chaos or nearer death." *V* is, therefore, full of barren landscapes, glowless and dirty cities, buildings in their progress towards dust; in sum, all the environment contains "hints of exhaustion, extinction, dehumanization," and "instead of the characters living in their environment, environment lives through the characters, who thereby tend to become figures illustrating a process. ..."

As Mehemet, the captain of the ship heading towards Valletta, tells his passenger Sidney Stencil—perhaps the main character of *V*—"'Both the world and we... began to die from the moment of birth.'" Since entropy is irreversible, the main question is not what man can do to stop the process that leads towards destruction. The question is how man should regard this phenomenon. Is entropy the result of chance or a result of a "malignant purpose"?" Are we surrounded by plots—social, natural, cosmic; or is there no plot, no hidden configuration of intent, only gratuitous matter and chance?" Is nothingness the next step after inanimateness? Pynchon does not provide a definite answer to these questions. On the one hand, Herbert Stencil supports the idea of the world being controlled by a perverse force represented by V. Although the possibility
of V.'s existence is not totally denied in the novel, Stencil's quest for V. is depicted as a paranoiac obsession. Stencil himself has doubts about the validity of his search for V.: He would dream perhaps once a week that it had all been a dream, and that now he'd awakened to discover the pursuit of V. was merely a scholarly quest after all, an adventure of the mind, in the tradition of *The Golden Bough* or *The White Goddess*. (V. p. 50)

On the other hand, through Benny Profane, Pynchon explores the possibility of living in an "antiparanoic" state, "in a state of volitionless rambling, with no clues to follow, adrift in pure contingency and randomness," where "nothing is connected to anything." The movement without destination or purpose is called "yo-yoing" in the novel, and not only Profane "yo-yoes," but also the planets:

> If you look from the side at a planet swinging around in its orbit, split the sun with a mirror and imagine a string, it all looks like a yo-yo. The point furthest from the sun is called aphelion. The point furthest from the yo-yo hand is called, by analogy, apocheir. (V. p. 26)

Neither Profane's nor Stencil's position is favored. The only certainty of Pynchon's novel is that entropy is something mysterious and beyond man's capacity for understanding. Man is, therefore, hopelessly destined to walk toward his annihilation.

Poe's characters, like Pynchon's, live in a chaotic world. Poe is also concerned about the idea of entropy, and
in *Eureka*, for example, he talks about the possibility of a force—God—behind man's journey towards entropy and ultimate nothingness, but this is all presented as a possibility, not as a fact.

Nothingness is the most appalling horror for Poe's characters; the narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" loses all his hope and desire to fight for his life when he realizes that he is destined for the nothingness of the bottom of the pit; and the hair of the narrator of "A Descent into the Maelstrom" turns white after he faces the void of the waters. In the same way, Pynchon's characters fear the threat of nothingness. What most haunts the explorer of the Antarctic Captain Hugh Godolphin about Vheissu, the fantastic place that he assures to have visited, is that what he saw "beneath her skin" was "Nothing" (*V.*, p. 188). The idea of the absurd is directly associated with the idea of nothingness since it implies a vacuum of logic. Sidney Stencil, for instance, observes how the idea of facing a situation that lacks a logical explanation affects the behavior of human beings; Stencil remembers "times when whole embassiesful of personnel had simply run amok and gibbering in the streets when confronted with a Situation which refused to make sense no matter who looked at it, or from what angle" (*V.*, p. 173). And for Poe and Pynchon, human life is absurd because it defies any logical explanation; nevertheless, life is "a street we must walk" (*V.*
p. 303). The philosophy that both writers appear to advocate in front of the sight of the absurd seems to be the one reflected in Dahoud's—one of V's characters—words:

"Don't you know... that life is the most precious possession you have?"
"Ho, ho," said Ploy through his tears.
"Why?"
"Because" said Dahoud, "without it, you'd be dead." (V, p. 4)

Poe and Pynchon are aware of man's natural tendency to fit things into logical patterns. They are also aware that not everything fits into a pattern, and that man just has to accept this fact or become paranoiac trying to find impossible explanations.

Death is one of those things that puzzle our mind and, yet, cannot be fully understood as Poe emphasizes in his stories. In V, Pynchon uses a form of death, entropy, as a motif to parody man's efforts of ordering the chaos. Poe's and Pynchon's characters are condemned to be defeated in their quests, and their readers and critics—particularly of Pynchon's work—are forced to join the characters in their absurd quests and to experience the same anguish that the characters experience. The two writers, meanwhile, remain backstage directing, controlling, and laughing at the confusion they create, but without being caught by it.

The human need to see patterns "which may easily turn into the tendency to suspect plots," is presented in Pynchon's V, particularly through Stencil's search for V.
The quest for V. is what gives continuity to the novel and, ironically, V. is possibly just an illusion, "a remarkably scattered concept" (V., p. 364). The reader is bombarded with so many words starting with "V" that he is led to think that Stencil's quest has some justification, and that Stencil is finally going to find V. On the other hand, the proliferation of V.'s leads to suspicion, particularly after the dentist Eigenvalue shares his thoughts with the reader:

Cavities in the teeth occur for good reason, Eigenvalue reflected. But even if there are several per tooth, there's no conscious organization there against the life of the pulp, no conspiracy. Yet we have men like Stencil, who must go about grouping the world's random caries into cabals. (V., p. 139)

The reader is, therefore, inevitably forced into the pursuit for V. and frustrated in his expectation to find her or to have a definite answer to whether V. really exists as a "master cabal" or is just a product of Stencil's obsessed imagination.

Stencil's quest, in any case, is presented as absurd since the very beginning, as motivated by a sentence in Sidney Stencil's journal. Herbert Stencil's movement is not "yo-yoing" like Profane's because Stencil does have a purpose. Stencil's activity keeps him away from inertness; however, if V. is, in fact, a plot against life, Stencil's quest will lead him to his inevitable destruction. "Find her: what then?", Stencil thinks,
Only that what love there was to Stencil had become directed entirely inward, toward this acquired sense of animateness. Having found this he could hardly release it, it was too dear. To sustain it he had to hunt V.; but if he should find her, where else would there be to go but back into half-consciousness? He tried not to think, therefore, about any end to the search. Approach and avoid. (V., p. 44)

A great deal of the narrative of Pynchon's novel is filtered through Stencil's consciousness, and Stencil is not a reliable narrator; he has the tendency to "Stencilize" his accounts of past events. Herbert, for instance, tells Eigenvalue part of Mondaugen's story. After Stencil sings a foxtrot tune that Godolphin supposedly sang to Mondaugen, Eigenvalue interrupts Stencil:

"They spoke in German? English? Did Mondaugen know English then?" Forstalling a nervous outburst by Stencil: "I only think it strange that he should remember an unremarkable conversation, let alone in that much detail, thirty-four years later. A conversation meaning nothing to Mondaugen but everything to Stencil." (V., p. 231)

In the preceding chapter, before Stencil's conversation with Eigenvalue, Pynchon had already justified Eigenvalue's suspicions about Stencil's objectivity. Mondaugen himself had told his story to Stencil but:

Stencil listened attentively. The tale proper and the questioning after took no more than thirty minutes. Yet the next Wednesday afternoon at Eigenvalue's office, when Stencil retold it, the yarn had undergone considerable change: had become, as Eigenvalue put it, Stencilized. (V., p. 211)
"Stencilization" can easily pass unnoticed because Herbert, like Henry Adams, refers to himself in the third person, 

This helped "Stencil" appear as only one among a repertoire of identities. "Forcible dislocation of personality" was what he called the general technique, which is not exactly the same as "seeing the other's fellow's point of view"; for it involved, say, wearing clothes that Stencil wouldn't be caught dead in, eating foods that would have made Stencil gag, living in unfamiliar digs, frequenting bars or cafés of a non-Stencilian character; all this for weeks on end; and why? To keep Stencil in his place; that is, in the third person. (V, p. 51)

In spite of the indications of the author that the device is an illusion, it creates the impression of "detached observation." In fact, Pynchon himself uses the same device to remain detached from the novel; he hides himself behind Stencil and disguises his own plotting instinct by locating it in Stencil. Stencil is "the man who is trying to make the connections and links, and put together the story which might well have been Pynchon's novel." Since ambiguity is an essential element of the novel, Pynchon covers his tracks and prevents the reader from reaching the authorial perspective. The third chapter of the book, "In which Stencil, a quick-change artist, does eight impersonations," is the climax of "Stencilization" and "dislocation of personality" and an ironic reminder to the reader of what Pynchon is doing throughout his novel. Chapter three and the whole novel prove to the reader how limited his perception of reality is. As Sidney Stencil says,
we are observers of a "Situation" that has a diagram in four dimensions while our eye is "conditioned to seeing its world in only three" (V., p. 174).

Not only the "Stencilization" of important parts of the narrative contribute to the confusion and uncertainty of the reader, but also the point of view. "Pynchon uses omniscient narrators, direct addresses to the audience, characters capable of heightened speech (in the form of a song), authorial judgements on character and situation, verse epigraphs—all the paraphernalia of the loose baggy monsters of an earlier age of fiction." Pynchon's handling of point of view has the objective of casting doubts on the sources of the information given. Before Stencil starts his eight impersonations, for instance, the narrator—maybe Stencil himself—remarks that "The rest was impersonation and dream" (V., p. 52). Later in the novel, also, Pynchon "arranges the plot so that a juxtaposition will make an incident doubtful." After Fausto Maijstral, who is the victim of a split personality, discovers that his wife is dead, "he experiences a 'blank space'" which is followed by his encounter with the Bad Priest. Fausto's "blacking out" makes the account of the encounter with the Bad Priest doubtful.

The reader's confusion is also increased by the proliferation of characters and subplots. Some of these secondary characters acquire some importance inside the two
main stories—Benny's and Stencil's—only to lose it suddenly. Moreover, some of the characters metamorphose or have doubles while others, like Benny, do not change at all. The alleged V., for instance, is Victoria Wren, Veronica the rat, Vera Meroving, Hedwig Vogelsan, Lady V. in Paris, the Bad Priest, and possibly Mme. Viola. Fausto Maijstral has five personalities, and his daughter Paola is also Ruby the black prostitute. Stencil, also, is the double of his father and Profane's foil, as well as "an artist of impersonations." In some instances characters appear without having any logical explanation for their appearances. In chapter six, for example, Geronimo, Angel, and Profane have been looking for Fina who disappeared from her home, they happen to meet Winsome—who is, casually, Fina's boss--up in a tree, "dangling microphones" after midnight (pp. 136-137). The episode does not receive any explanation in the novel and remains isolated. Some characters also have reactions inconsistent with their personalities; for example, the far-from-intellectual Pig Bodine who suddenly asks Rachel what she thinks about "Sartre's thesis that we are all impersonating an identity" (V. p. 118). Characterization is used by Pynchon to attach "several common sense notions about people: that they are three-dimensional, have a unique identity, remain fairly consistent, are understandable, and have reasonably unified
personalities despite their complexities. The reader is led to undergo a *déjà vu* experience.

The disorientation of the reader is also accomplished by giving him different options about different matters, but without supporting any one of these options more than the others, and in some cases even undermining all the given alternatives. The reader is, thus, forced to make his own decision and sometimes without a viable alternative. Several theories about time and history, for instance, are given throughout *V*; each theory has some logic and none is more favored than the others. Eigenvalue, for example, sees history as a succession of parabolas (*V*, p. 141); Fausto Maijstral considers that "time exists but remains static" (*V*, p. 285), and he also conceives history as moving along a sine-curve (*V*, p. 287); his friend Dnubieta sees history as a step-function (*V*, p. 310); Signor Mantissa believes that history is a cycle; Kholsky conceives history as a woman, mysterious but "at least measurable" (*V*, p. 381) and as "the product of only material objects that cause economic changes, which in turn increase 'Socialist Awareness'" (*V*, p. 380).

The most important and most undermined options presented in the novel are Benny's and Stencil's ways of "animation." Benny can be an example of Fausto's theory of timelessness; he "yo-yoes" from one place to the other,
purposelessly, and yet remains static because he does not learn anything. Benny's state is, in a way, close to inanimateness. On the other hand, Herbert Stencil does move from place to place, too, and even across time, but his movements have a purpose: to follow V. and meet her. Stencil's movement, nevertheless, is the result of his obsession and, therefore, not given as a recommended option, either. Besides, Stencil, too, is close to inanimateness.

The end of the novel is full of alternatives. If V. does not exist as "a master cabal," only as "a scattered concept," Stencil is, therefore, condemned to keep on pursuing "nothing." If V. does exist as a disseminator of inanimateness, Stencil is, in fact, running towards his own destruction. Moreover, Sidney Stencil had a love affair with Victoria Wren in Florence, and she can be Stencil's mother. If Victoria is V., Herbert is, ironically, a part of her also, and contains the germ of destruction. Herbert's search would be, then, a search for his mother, and if he is able to find her, the encounter would be a symbolic return to the womb and, therefore, to nothingness. Moreover Paola has V.'s ivory comb and hands it to her husband to remind him of their encounter (V., p. 417). Joseph W. Slade says that "presumably the comb has been purified, and carries no evil with it," and that there is nothing ambiguous about the scene, although Paola is "curiously stoic." The scene is, to my judgement, very ambiguous, nevertheless.
Paola is not a completely "animate" character herself; she has been in contact with Profane, who is almost inanimate, and with the Whole Sick Crew and has undergone a metamorphosis herself. Moreover, when Paola hands the comb to her husband, the narrator, once again, reminds the reader about the comb's deadly carvings—the five crucified Limeys. Also, she never shows the comb to Stencil. If the comb is still one of V.'s identification marks, Stencil is ironically following a wrong clue. Paola was the one who convinced Stencil to go to Valletta, a place where he refused to visit because his father had died there "under unknown circumstances in 1919" (V., p. 42). The circumstances of Sidney's death are disclosed to us by the omniscient narrator in the final chapter; and Sidney's death may not have been accidental if Veronica Manganese was V.. Herbert is Sidney's double and is, perhaps, being led to suffer the same fatal "accident" because, like his father, Herbert abandons Valletta by ship. Herbert, also, has dragged Profane with him partially to "handle" Paola because he feels that he cannot do it by himself. (V., p. 358).

Pynchon's novel parodies "the compulsion of the human mind to find pattern in events" on a literary level, too. Max F. Schulz considers that Pynchon's novel

...strives to be omnibus: to ape the spy tale, the romance, the political novel, the Oedipus quest, and the documentary; to echo the symbolic texture of Conrad, the complex dreams of Freud, the social commentary of Dos
Passos, the technocratic apprehension of science fiction, the aesthetic decadence of Nabokov, the vapid heroics of comic opera and of Victorian adventure stories, the waste-land mythography of Eliot, the Sehnsucht utopianism of Lost Horizon, the moral vision of Faulkner, and even the acrid iconoclasm of Black Humor.

The attack on the reader's sense of order is also perpetrated by the initial confusing connections between the chapters and between the different characters, and by the yoking of antagonistic elements such as history and fiction, and horror and laughter. Pynchon, for example, weaves a complex fictional web around a historical event such as the 1904 uprising of the Bantus (or Hereros) against the Germans in a section of chapter nine. Also, some of the most horrible and disgusting sections of the novel are, at the same time, the funniest; for example Esther's nose operation and Father Fairing's journals. Father Fairing, the priest who devoted the end of his life to the conversion of New York rats to the Roman Catholic Church, explains his daily activities in his journal: "After a breakfast of roast rat ("the livers," he wrote, "are particularly succulent") he set about his first task: learning to communicate with the rats. Presumably he succeeded" (V., p. 106). Teresa, a rat member of Fairing's "flock" accuses Bartholomew, another rat, of holding Marxist views himself, and a terrible fight broke out, in which poor Teresa had an eye scratched from the socket. "To spare her further pain, I put her to sleep and made a delicious meal from her remains, shortly after sext. I have
discovered the tails, if boiled long enough, are quite agreeable. (V., pp. 106-107)

But the priest's "love" is Veronica, the rat who wants to become a nun. The omniscient narrator comments that:

At no point in the twenty or so years the legend had been handed on did it occur to anyone to question the old priest's sanity. It is this way with sewer stories. They just are. Truth or falsity don't apply. (V., p. 108)

Although these particular passages make the reader laugh, Pynchon's humor is more intellectual than "funny" and, in that sense, comparable to the humor of Poe's "Gothic" tales. The best "joke" of Pynchon's novel is the fact that V. is what holds it together, the source of continuity, and V. is ultimately an illusion, nothing, just a scattered concept. The only certainty that a reader can obtain is that V. is Pynchon's novel.

Edgar Allan Poe tried to remain detached from his works not to be caught in the chaos and destruction that he depicted; he tried to preserve the point of view of the diddler of his story and of the lynx of his "Silence--A Fable" to laugh at the absurd and remain sane. Detachment is very important for Thomas Pynchon, too, so important that he has managed not only to "disappear" from his work, but also to preserve his anonymity in spite of his success as a writer and of all the attempts of his critics of tracing his personal life. The "flesh-and-blood" Thomas Pynchon still remains a mystery.
In *V.*, Pynchon parodies our natural inclination to find patterns and the danger of turning those patterns into plots or conspiracies. But, obviously, fictional writers are guiltier than anyone else of finding plots. Pynchon, however, locates or hides his plotting instinct in *Stencil* and is able to preserve his distance in this manner. *Stencil* attempts to do the same, too, by referring to himself in third person. Furthermore, Phychon liberates himself from fulfilling the reader's expectations. He laughs at the reader's confusion—and probably at his critics—and remains untouched on the background as the only authority able to know *V.*'s country. The reader is just "a tourist" and remains unable to have an accurate knowledge of *V.*'s world. *V.*'s country is unfriendly to the reader-tourist, a "conspiracy" against him. The reader is subtly led to a trap. To obtain some meaning from the novel, the reader has to untie its "plot," and yet our compulsion to see plots is the main objective of Pynchon's parody. Perhaps the only possible way to look at the novel and at the world is following McClintic's advice to Paola: "'Keep cool but care'" (*V.*, p. 343).

Pynchon shares with Poe a chaotic vision of the world, a distrust of man's ability to comprehend reality, a tendency to laugh at his readers, a self-consciousness or detachment from their writings, and a tendency to yoke violence and horror with humor. Pynchon's *V.* can also be
compared directly with some of Poe's works. Stencil's tendency to see plots, the dismantlement of the Bad Priest, and the use of the theme of inanimateness or nothingness have close similarities with Poe's "The Man That Was Used Up." Stencil's obsession for V. has some relation to Poe's stories of women who haunt men's imaginations, such as "Morella," "Berenice," "Ligeia," and "Leonora." The "Siege Party" and the motif of the clock recall Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death." Finally, Godolphin's Vheissu, Stencil's character, and the ambiguous ending of Pynchon's novel echo Poe's The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. Thomas H. Schaub connects Poe with Pynchon also, concluding that both writers belong to the same line of American artists whose lives and documents are "studies in the difficulty they faced in relating to America"; and among these artists, Schaub also includes Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry James, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Ralph Ellison. 16
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Black humor became widely popular in America after World War II, but some of its characteristics can be traced back in the works of earlier American writers. Elements of black humor have been alleged in the works of writers such as Benjamin Franklin, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, but there has been little recognition of the importance of the work of Edgar Allan Poe in the development of twentieth-century black humor in American literature. In fact, Poe's work influenced American humor in two ways: by means of a direct line in the "natural" development of the branch of American literature that led to it and by means of France and the role that he played in this country as a catalyst for the germination of Symbolism, Surrealism, Dadaism, and Antirrealism, artistic movements that contributed in the development of black humor. Poe's work has more characteristics in common with black humor than any work by any other American writer before him.

Like the world presented in the works of twentieth-century black humorists, Poe's fiction depicts a chaotic and threatening universe. His fictional universe reflects his conviction that man's perception of reality is chaotic
since we are restrained by our fixed position in space and time and by the limitations of our inner self. Through his tales, Poe, therefore, sought to undermine man's belief in the reliability of his perception of "reality" and to release himself from the "crippling imprisonment" of his own limitations.¹

According to Poe, man is living in a permanent state of "externally and internally induced deception." The aims of his work were, therefore, to annihilate this "fabric of deception" and "to see into that actuality beyond three-dimensional existence." Poe realized that the acquisition of "the correct point of view" was "the essential prerequisites for such an insight."² The literary self-parody of the German Romantic Ironists provided Poe with the "correct" point of view that he was looking for. Like the German Romantic Ironists, Poe, thus, tried to achieve a position of detachment or "objective-subjectivity" from where he could obtain a "double awareness" of existence. Moreover, Poe's predilection for the hoax—a form of satire which is "a constituent element in American folk humor"—was also in agreement with his philosophical framework. In this way, he used the hoax to show "man's ability for and vulnerability to deception" and to suggest "the experience of that reality which is camouflaged by the illusive phenomenal universe."³
Black humorists, like Poe, consider that we are unable to see "the whole of existence" and that our interpretation of that portion of reality that we are able to see lacks accuracy. Like Poe, they too seek to reveal how our conventional idea of reality is, in fact, "treacherous quicksand."\(^4\) Poe undermines his reader's confidence in his perception of reality by creating the effect of verisimilitude and leaving the result of the stories as unexplained wonders, by yoking horror and violence with humor--in the same way that the humorists of the Old Southwest did--and by providing the account of the events through the recollections of unreliable narrators. Black humorists, also, combine such disparate things as violence and cruelty with humor, emotions with intellect, and fantasy with realism to mix up the reader's expectations and sense of security, and they use a variety of techniques in order to destroy "the illusion of reality which generally sustains a work of art."\(^5\) In this way, by undermining the reader's confidence in his perception of reality, by maintaining an intellectual control of the fictional universe that they create, and by laughing at the absurd condition of the human being, Poe and the twentieth-century black humorists intend to observe the absurdities of man's limitations and of the universe from a "subliminally ideallistic" point of view and liberate themselves from "the web of illusion" of our human existence.\(^6\)
Even though Poe's work has been the object of hundreds of critical studies, most of his critics have failed to detect the ironic vein that unifies Poe's work as a whole and have been, therefore, not completely fair in their appreciations of the accomplishments of this great American literary figure. Most of Poe's critics have not given importance to the ironic supporting structure of Poe's work, in part, because of a common tendency to see Poe as the narrator of his tales and not as the cool manipulator behind his characters, and perhaps also because of a desire to avoid the complication of an already complex literary figure and the sophistication of Poe's psychopathology. Nevertheless, since irony is such a vital element of Poe's work and since most of the critics have not taken it into consideration, there is still a great deal of work to be done to reach a complete understanding of Poe's writings and to do more justice to Poe's contributions to American letters.
APPENDIX A

NOTES

I. INTRODUCTION


2 Winston, p. 270.


5 Bier, p. 1.


8 Austin, p. viii.


10 Hennig Cohen and William B. Dillingham, Introd.


13 Cohen and Dillingham, pp. xiv-xviii.


II. POE'S IDEA OF HUMOR


9 Thompson, Introd., pp. 8-9.


11 Trieber, p. 34.


14 Weissbuch, p. 291.


III. POE'S IRRONIC TECHNIQUE AND BLACK HUMOR


5. Thompson, *Introd.*., p. 11.


Thompson, *Poe's Fiction*, p. 69.


Wilson, p. 215.


26 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in Collected Works, Vol. II, pp. 547-548. All further references to this story are indicated in the text.

27 Thompson, Poe's Fiction, p. 118.

28 Thompson, Poe's Fiction, p. 118.

29 Thompson, Poe's Fiction, p. 118.


31 Thompson, Poe's Fiction, p. 16.


33 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat," in Collected Works, Vol. III, p. 852. All further references to this story are indicated in the text.

34 McElroy, p. 109.

35 McElroy, p. 111.

36 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," in Collected Works, Vol. II, p. 398. All further references to this story are indicated in the text.
IV. POE, NATHANAEL WEST AND MISS LONELYHEARTS


4 Light, pp. 37-38.

5 Comerchero, p. 5.

6 Light, p. 40.

7 Comerchero, p. 15.

8 Comerchero, p. 21.


10 Kierly, p. 38.

11 Kierly, p. 41.

12 Comerchero, p. 15.

13 Quoted by Comerchero, p. 24.

14 Comerchero, p. 24.


17 Hassan, p. 797.

18 Kierly, p. 35.


20 Comerchero, p. 76.

21 Nathanael West, Miss Lonelyhearts, in Miss Lonelyhearts & The Day of the Locust (1962; reset ed. N.Y.: New Directions Paperbook, 1969), p. 1. Subsequent references to this edition are indicated in the text as ML.


23 Comerchero, p. 25.

24 Kierly, p. 31.

25 Comerchero, p. 77.

26 Light, pp. 80-81.


30 Hyman, p. 23.


34 West, "Some Notes on Miss L.," p. 66.


V. POE AND JOSEPH HELLER'S CATCH-22

1 Dickstein, p. 282.


3 Dickstein, p. 282n.


5 Brustein, p. 10.

6 Robert Protherough, "The Sanity of 'Catch-22,'" The Human World, No. 3 (May 1971), p. 65, rpt. in A *Catch-

7 G.R. Thompson, Poe's Fiction, p. 172.

8 G.R. Thompson, Poe's Fiction, pp. 171-172.


10 G.R. Thompson, Poe's Fiction, p. 192.


15 Ritter, p. 77.


19 Kennard, p. 263.

20 Kennard, p. 262.

21 Kennard, p. 263.

22 Kennard, p. 265.

23 Kennard, pp. 264-265.

24 Kennard, pp. 265-266.

25 Kennard, p. 266.

26 Kennard, pp. 268-269

27 Kennard, p. 269.


VI. POE AND THOMAS PYNCHON'S V.


6 Tanner, "Caries and Cabals," p. 49.


8 Tanner, "Caries and Cabals," p. 52.


10 Stark, p. 29.


12 Stark, pp. 111, 117.
13 Slade, p. 122.


15 Tanner, Thomas Pynchon, p. 12.


VII. CONCLUSION


3 Ketterer, p. 82.


7 Bier, p. 371.
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