

Death-equivalents and low-level trauma: Literary representations of dread

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Abstract: The discernible sources of dreaded states of the self are experiences which can be deemed *traumatic*. Corresponding occurrences comprise early object loss or other loss events, like those brought about by death or the proximity thereof, but also those occasioned by death equivalents. Such daunting affect states are plentifully indicated in Edgar Allan Poe's work. The article puts forth, therefore, an analysis that could be legitimately interpreted as a staunch commitment to record the powerful ways of allowing reference to emerge and to represent unassimilable catastrophes. Thus, the first contention of this project has been the recognising of the trauma problematic in the analysed texts. The failure of the (literary) subject to gain immediate understanding of his/ her environment came forth as the focal point of the argument. The analysis thus served as a launching pad for a large theoretical quest, aimed at exploring the ways in which literary texts speak both about and through the profound story of traumatic experience. Viewed in this way, Poe's aesthetics are no less an extension of his fiction than a commentary on it.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, states of dread, low-level trauma, death-equivalents

Theoretical introduction

The experience of dread, an excessive manifestation of anxiety brought about by extreme fear, is understood as gaining substance under the guise of a "dreaded (state of the) self," in keeping with recent theoretical advancements by Ehud Koch in *Representations of Dread* (2017, 289). Such delineations indicate psychic hazards "ranging from a common, feared identification to states of disconnection, desolation, ego dissolution, and nonexistence." (Ibidem) An alternative notion of "fright" might prove inadequate to encompass the province of events

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symbolized by dread. This quandary is resolved by retaining as a specific characteristic an attendant concept of “awe,” also defined as “terror” and “horror,” notions which indicate considerably more intensity, as well as a more dominant unconscious substructure than fear. This supercharge of strong affective significance ultimately steered towards the present use of *dread* in the description of experiences suggested by such constructs as dreaded self and dreaded states of the self. Sometimes, “dread” is employed interchangeably with “fear,” for instance, when the affective experience does not echo an awe-inspiring inner reality. Other times, dread is employed to symbolize horrendous, crushing experiences that have no verbal or visual representation and appear to lack an anticipatory function. Yet, Ehud Koch (2017, 286) reserves “dread” for those affective experiences which “serve a *signal function*, alerting one to the danger of recurrence of a most fearsome reality”, which comes to further individualise the specific brand of trauma in Poe’s writings, namely a recurrence of a most fearsome reality or state that elicits horror and terror.

We could browse through some of the countless writers (William James is one of them) who have illuminated, before or in Poe’s time, such terrifying experiences of dread, proving that the discourse of low-level trauma, of terror and horror is a common occurrence in literature and art. Novelists, poets and playwrights have put forward substantial delineations of these customarily hard-to-articulate states of being. Within psychology, a lot of attention was given over the years to the nature and articulation of emotions, and William James was perhaps the most prominent contributor to the issue. He represented dread, very poignantly as “melancholia”, a constituent of depression. After describing the horror experienced by a correspondent after having met, in an asylum, a young epileptic he added “*That shape am I ... potentially.*” He made use of this account to render a very evocative representation of dread:

... desperation absolute and complete, the whole universe coagulating about the sufferer into a material of overwhelming horror, surrounding him without opening or end. Not the conception or intellectual perception of evil, but the grisly blood-freezing heart falsifying sensation of it close upon one, and no other conception or sensation able to live for a moment in its presence. (James 1950, 261)

Feeling states such as mistrust, shame, guilt, and despair – many of which will be represented in the subsequent analyses of a few of Poe's pieces, can also be seen as instantiations of low-level trauma, "dreaded states of being at times of crisis and regression" (Cârstea 2022; 2023).

In many psychoanalytically-informed writings, in particular, frequent references are encounter to 'bad' and 'hated' introjects where dreaded states of the self are understood. This is also quite eloquently discerned from the works of Ronald Fairbairn (1982), a representative of object-relations psychoanalysis. In Fairbairn's perspective, the ultimate terror was the unfettered discharge of 'bad,' 'intolerable,' 'internalized objects.' Although this discharge is depicted in quasi-similarity to Sigmund Freud's 'return of the repressed,' the view of the repressed is that of a bad, internalized object, and not so much that of an unsuitable wish or its root instinctual drive. The surfacing to consciousness of the representation of this bad object is perceived as menacing to such a degree because it propels the subject into the underlying danger: that of losing and being forfeited the object, which leaves the ego helpless, alone, and weakened by the very defensive measures meant to safeguard it. (Freud 1994) The danger of a possible discharge of the internalized bad object came to be recognized, very distinctly, in paranoid thought processes: "When such an escape of bad objects occurs, the patient finds himself confronted with terrifying situations which have been unconscious" (Fairbairn 1982, 76). In the case of paranoid formations, the bad object appears in its exteriorized manifestation as a "persecutor."

Another manifestation of the dreaded self finds intimation in Harry Stack Sullivan's (1958) notion of 'not me.' Wordless, formless, it seems, to all intents and purposes, to be a construct for the disowned, repressed experiences which, if conscious, might pose a threat to the very centre of one's being. It is only grasped by inference, generally as a result of disconcerting affect states, labelled by Sullivan "the uncanny emotions," specifically, loathing, awe, horror, dread. Such daunting affect states are plentifully indicated in Edgar Allan Poe's work. In one of his studies, Donald Winnicott (1984) interprets elemental dread as connected to "primitive agonies." Similar to Sullivan, Winnicott argues that such affect states can ostensibly be deduced from specific defensive measures typically witnessed in states of ego dissolution. What distinguishes him from Sullivan's view, who thought these states to be nameless horrors, only "known" by means of the "uncanny emotions," is his proposition of substantive, verbal,

affective forms in the place of such “primitive agonies,” observing that “... anxiety is not [a] strong enough word here” (Winnicott 1984, 105). Winnicott’s index of agonies included crushing threats like forfeiture of one’s being, wholeness, and basic necessities and he drew a connection between said primitive agonies and proportionately severe measures like ‘disintegration,’ ‘depersonalisation,’ the latter of which easily assimilable with the doubling involved in traumatic experiences, with the appearance of the traumatised self glossed over earlier. Winnicott puts forward the paradox intrinsic to the notion that the primal agony shielded against in the “fear of breakdown” represents an event which has already occurred. That it remains unknown to consciousness can be pinned down to the “fact” that it happened in early infancy, namely at a time when the yet unfledged self could not register or manage such an overwhelming experience, which was, additionally, perceived as heightened by a critical dereliction of care by the ‘facilitating environment’. Donald Winnicott observed that persons who suffer in the aftermath of low-level traumas ‘compulsively’ seek to overcome unfamiliar, uncontrollable experiences, while concomitantly being controlled by defensive measures designed to not know, which is in concurrence with the propositions of trauma theorists. And this paradox foregrounds the similarities with disavowal and the splitting of the ego, both seemingly characteristic of states of dread.

Wilfred Bion’s (1984)¹ ‘nameless dread,’ which bears fair similarities to Sullivan’s ‘not me,’ Winnicott’s ‘primitive agony,’ and some representations of Fairbairn’s ‘bad internal object,’ thus comes across as an inner remainder of projections which have not been ‘contained.’ Paradigmatic here is, according to Koch, the “fear of dying”, customarily split off and projected onto an other. Containing it renders the fear less dangerous and more controllable, because it is reintrojected, whereas failing to contain it makes the fear doubly horrifying. A primal defense occurs, by means of which this fear is relieved of any form or substance, existing solely as a concealed and indecipherable inner hazard. It resembles to a certain extent the intimidating quality of the Kleinian ‘persecutory object’ in the

¹ Deemed the most original and the most intriguing psychoanalyst after Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein (1986), Wilfred Bion (1984) charted the geographies of psychotic unconscious processes mostly in relation to groups.

‘paranoid schizoid position’ (Klein 1986), which, I argue, Edgar Allan Poe is the poet of.

What convincingly emerges from all the previous accounts is that the discernible sources of dreaded states of the self are experiences which can be deemed *traumatic*. These occurrences comprise early object loss or other loss events, like those brought about by death or the proximity thereof, but also those occasioned by the death equivalents listed above. Though diverse, all these experiences are connected through their suddenness and abruptness, through the likely eliciting of profound and devastating emotion, such as the forfeiture of agency, felt as severe vulnerability, coupled with the threat to the perception of everything ‘real,’ both in oneself and the outer world, generally labelled “ego dissolution.” To glimpse such situations and perceptions in attempts at recollecting them carries the threat of replicating and reliving them. This hazard becomes apprehensively anticipated, dreaded, for fear of finding oneself, repeatedly, crushed by the uncontrollable.

As touched upon earlier on, the experience of horror and terror lies at the centre of dread. This term itself encapsulates with a sense of urgency the hazard of reliving the terrific awfulness occurring when one feels overpowered by forces beyond one’s control, such as in diverse frightening or traumatic events. Dissimilar to defencelessness, helplessness and dejectedness – affect states indicative of associated depressive responses to pain – the state of dread bears the overtones of a cautious apprehension of replicating and reliving the awful. (Bibring 1953, 26-8)

According to Koch (2017, 310-314), the sense of dread appears to be mainly and closely connected to aggression, whether outer or inner. Indeed, the violence of the devastating situation is generally intrinsic of the trauma itself. The fear of reexperiencing and being taken by storm by hostile forces thus appears to be a major feature of the state of dread. Koch contends that certain equally hostile sides of oneself that are disavowed can be less recognized and more easily externalized in such states because they are intolerable, and when acknowledged, could be deemed similar to “feeling possessed by the devil.” Regardless of whether said dreaded sense of corruption is elicited as a reaction to “felt transgressions of superego injunctions or ego-ideal values, or whether it obtains from an omnipotent assumption of having brought the awfulness onto oneself, a kind of turning aggression against the self, this internal reality stands with trauma as a primary

cause for the development of dreaded self-representations and states of the self.”

Literary representations of low-level trauma

Poe’s world, it is said, is a world of irrational horror and mystery resistant to analysis and understanding. Poe’s speakers are often rendered speechless by horror. Reaching the end of his tale, the old man of the “Maelstrom” who called it “folly” to describe the hurricane that destroyed their ship, responds that at his rescue he was exhausted from fatigue and “speechless from the memory of its horror” (Poe 1965, 247). And the criminal narrator of “William Wilson” denies that “human Language can adequately portray *that* astonishment, *that* horror” which took hold of him at the sight of his own bloodied reflection in the mirror. (Ibid, 324)

Traumatized speechlessness, the claimed inadequacy of language alternates within the separate tales. To single out the last, as though “linguistic impotence” is best accounted for as a failure of language rather than of will, strength, or courage seems arbitrary. If theoretical priority belongs anywhere, I would place it on the frequent overt failures to describe or speak, the failure to inscribe, to register the overwhelming event as it occurs: “Why shall I minutely detail the unspeakable horrors of that night?” inquires the narrator of “Ligeia,” rhetorically. “Why shall I pause to relate how this hideous drama of revivification was repeated?” (Ibid, 268). “Unspeakable” here clearly means too horrible to speak of, ineffable or beyond the expressive powers of language. And that fear or horror, I would argue, is what lies behind the professed incapacities of speech.

The unspoken and unexecuted curse in “Eleonora” is presented as a retribution, the “exceeding great horror of which will not permit them to make retord (sic!) of it here” (Ibid, 241). Linguistic incapacity accounts for silence here. As the painter of the oval portrait “would not see” that the paints of his canvas are the lifeblood of his wife and model, as the victims of horror throughout the tales avert their eyes when the terror overwhelms, so the speakers, shaken to the point of breakdown by forbidden experience or knowledge, refuse to speak. “I would not, if I could,” says William Wilson’s double, “embody a retord of my later years of unspeakable misery, and unpardonable crime” (Ibid, 300). Why indeed should he detail the horrors, why relate the physically hideous or the morally unendurable? The protections of a decidedly ‘rationalizing’ narrator of “The Fall of the House of

Usher” are symptomatic. “There were times, indeed,” he confesses, “when I thought [Usher’s] unceasingly agitated mind was labouring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage. At times, again, I was obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness” (Ibid, 289).

The habits of the narrator are reflections of the workings of the text. The intellectualizing narrator of “Usher,” “has not learned to accept the awful truth – Usher’s truth – that the world’s worst horrors are unendurable because they are unaccountable” (Porte 2012, 241). William Freedman’s assessment of Poe’s creations tells otherwise. For him, the worst horrors in Poe’s tales are not those vaguely hinted at, but those described: the fear of premature burial, for example, the eye of the elderly man and the pounding of the revealing heart beneath the floor, the eye of the black cat, Madeline’s rise and Ligeia’s return, the menacing swing of the pendulum as it nears its victim, even the teeth of Berenice (were they not so nearly comic). “These, not the vaguely suggested horrors, are the most powerful purveyors of the effect of terror,” and Porte, in fact, against his own claim that the most frightening horrors are those that resist explanation, ultimately accounts for the ostensibly unnameable source of Roderick Usher’s fear. (Freedman 2002, 59)

Joseph Riddell argued that, with Poe, “an abyss has opened up between word and world” and that this chasm ushers in “a new literature, a self-critical or self-annihilating textual performance – the poem/story and even the critical essay” (2009, 129). Gerald Kennedy (2005, 29) identifies Poe as “perhaps the first American writer to interiorize disintegration”. Poe’s tales, remarks Dennis Pahl (2002, xv; xviii), “characterize truth-seeking in a decidedly violent manner,” but its exploration is necessarily hindered, cancelled by the “uncanny structural relation between subject and object, inside and outside, spectator and spectacle” which always keeps out of reach both meaning and knowledge. Similarly, Joan Dayan interprets Poe as a writer who provides a “rigorously indeterminate philosophy,” alongside narratives meant to prove the limitations of a bounded mind, which “cannot know the essence of anything” (2008, 138).

Viewed in this way, Poe’s aesthetics are no less an extension of his fiction than a commentary on it. As Freedman posits in *The Porous Sanctuary*, “[a]s a body of writing, Poe’s aesthetic systematically deflects the reader from the biographical to the textual, from content and meaning to form and craft, from profundity and subtlety to the

visible and simple,” (2002, 10) and, I would add, from a trauma-engendered discourse to a discourse of/ on trauma, only seemingly paradoxically from clarity to a hazy indefiniteness and uncertainty, and of course from Truth to Beauty.

Poe is deemed to “heighten the readers’ emotional involvement in the tales by duplicating, in actions he describes that have nothing to do with composition, the actual experience of reading. Rarely does Poe allow his readers to forget that as they read, they are in the middle of a tale” (Renza 2002, 50). The readership becomes inadvertently involved in everything that takes place in the narrative, they experience the terror of existence without being and without end, because the locus of registration/ inscription of the fictional trauma is none other than the readership itself.

In “Ligeia,” “Berenice,” “The Black Cat,” “Eleonora,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the deceased either actually return among the living or “undying death” – with a term proposed by Arthur Brown – takes form in the case of a premature burial. This undying death also becomes real in its manifestation as writing, since Poe’s tales confront the readership with the experience of the terror of undying death through the imagination of the run-ins with it enacted both in the narratives and in our awareness of the acts of writing and reading. As Arthur Brown remarks in his *Literature and the Impossibility of Death*: “[f]ar from disrupting the spell cast by the fiction, this self-awareness – of author, of story, of reader – makes the literary performance inseparable from lived experience and the story itself uncomfortably real” (2006, 449). Spurred into descriptions of traumatic experiences by a declared “imp of the perverse”, as described by the storytellers of “The Imp of the Perverse” and “The Black Cat,” Poe employs an apparently malevolent and damaging perverseness, although the stories’ action will demonstrate it to be, in the final analysis, benevolent and regenerative. Posited as “prima mobilia” of the human soul – an essential trait of existence – malice seemingly reflects Poe’s portentous vision in “Eureka”, where the somethingness of existence is premised on a preceding nothingness, differentiation is premised on a preceding unity, so that “all phenomena [of existence] are ascribable to” the concatenated concepts of ‘attraction’ and ‘repulsion’. “This indeed seems the case with perverseness, a principle of balancing negation inherent in the nature of existence, overriding will and antithetical to reason, a primary, indivisible determinant of human behaviour whose effect is to address without motive or exterior

purpose the horror of the trivialised murder, to secure, in other words, a form of justice through retribution” (Cleman 2001, 640).

Brown (2006, 451) offers the example of the narrator in “Berenice”, who “distinguishes between a ‘general reader’ and the kind of reader he was – a reader for whom the imaginary was the real. For him reading is linguistically linked with death in a ‘morbid irritability’ of the ‘attentive’ properties and in the ‘intensity of interest’ with which his meditative powers ‘busied and buried’ themselves.” The words employed by the narrator to designate his affliction echo those used by Poe to delineate his theory on literary creation. The “intensity of interest” experienced by the reading Egaeus calls to mind similarly “intense excitements” that writers of tales and poems stir in their readership when a unity of effect and impression are preserved.

“The Philosophy of Composition” examines Poe’s options for background in “The Raven” and the author states: “it has always appeared to me that a close circumscription of space is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident: it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention” (Poe 1965, 22). Edgar Allan Poe equates, here, the “Raven” speaker with whoever reads the poem: placing the speaker in a determined place means, in actuality, placing the reader there, too. “If death walks before him,” Brown argues, “if death is present in the ‘physical frame’ of Berenice, then it cannot be death” (Brown 2006, 57). Of all the particulars of Berenice’s face, Egaeus is most impressed by “*the teeth* of the changed Berenice”. They elicit in him the dread of existing after dying. “Would to God,” Egaeus bursts out, “that I had never be held them, or that, having done so, I had died!” (Poe 1965, 231) Egaeus’s fascination with the teeth characterises a similarly mesmerizing preoccupation with language. “Where is the end?” Rheta Keylor inquires, “Where is that death which is the hope of language? But language is the life that endures death and maintains itself in it” (2003, 229). This character’s dread is “to face the undying not as literature but as reality, and thus to transport his own being into that space where death is an impossibility” (Brown 2006, 57). Poe is thus “duplicating the acts of writing and reading in his plot, forcing us into the present tense of composition so that we enter the tale itself,” the critic concludes.

A cognate theme of the traumatic undying death is catalepsy, reoccurring obsessively in many of Poe’s stories under the guise of premature burials. Poe’s fascination with premature burial has been

variously explained and attributed, its roots traced to psychological, philosophical, and historical sources. For Shoshana Felman, it symbolized the phantasy of the return to the womb, “a fear, in particular, which haunted Poe and inspired the terrible and epic vision” described in “The Premature Burial” (1993, 42). For James Werner, “all this underground vault business in Poe only symbolizes that which takes place beneath the consciousness,” principally hate, which is “as slowly consuming, as secret, as underground, as subtle” as love. (2004, 42) “On top”, observed Werner, “all is fair-spoken. Beneath, there is awful murderous extremity of burying alive.” G.R. Thompson views premature burial as Poe’s image of the wretched human condition itself. “Poe’s image of man is that of a forlorn, perverse sentient being buried alive in the incomprehensible tomb of the universe” (2004, 218). For J. Gerald Kennedy (2005), the focus shifts from tale to tale, but the fascination is traced to Poe’s mortified obsession with death and claustrophobia and, at once more broadly and narrowly, to the cultural obsession with living interment that stalked Europe and America during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Gothic conventions of the sort explored so far, which I construed to be as many representations of trauma-induced dread, within the logic of the chapter, especially of its second half, are also behind another of Poe’s stories of horror, “The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym”, as Justin Edwards argues in his book *Gothic Passages* (2003). In concurrence with his insightful conclusions, my argument is that, at the back of the gothic veil in Poe’s Pym, for instance, with its decomposing figures, drastic hostility and anthropophagy, “are negotiations of antebellum racial discourses, negotiations that attempt to chart a course between dichotomies in order to call attention to the anxieties of potential bloody conflicts between blacks and whites, slaves and masters” (Edwards 2003, 34).

A similar Gothic discourse can be uncovered in Poe’s “William Wilson,” for example. Here, the protagonist is pursued by a person with the same name, height, features, education, and date of birth. Wilson’s double, who is said to be a “perfect imitation” of himself, discloses Wilson’s transgressions until, in a moment of panic and anger, Wilson stabs his double only to find that he has killed himself. Like “Markheim,” Poe’s text uses identificatory ambiguity to explore moral transgression and redemption. But unlike “Markheim,” Poe employs familial, racial, and genealogical degeneration to elucidate Wilson’s doubled identity.

Wilson, for instance, imparts his circumstances to the “detestation of his race,” a racial lineage that makes him a “slave of circumstances,” and he goes on to say that his “unspeakable misery” is connected to the “descenden[cy] of a race” that has passed on “constitutional disease[s]” from generation to generation (Poe 1965, 57; 65). His split self, then, is an “inherited family character” that derives from the defective “hereditary temper” of his race (Ibid, 58; 79). The low-level trauma triggered by such a death-equivalent as a splintered self is, as a result, inextricably embroiled in the gothic discourses of race and familial ancestry.

The place where Pym is kept prisoner during the text’s opening pages is seen to shift from Freud’s homelike space – a “little apartment” with comfortable blankets, abundant water, sea biscuit, Bologna sausages, and so on – to an unhome like “trap” that threatens to take Pym’s life, Edwards maintains. (2003, 15) In *Gothic Radicalism* (2000, 197), Andrew Smith draws a connection between the notion of the uncanny and the requirements of Gothicism: “Like antebellum discourses of hybridity, the uncanny’s multiple sides and ungoverned pattern are part of [its]Gothic import”. Seen in this light, hybrid bodies are integral to Poe’s Gothic narrative in that they reference an uncanny otherness that changes from the palpable to the concealed. “It is Peter’s hybridity,” Smith (2000, 198) argues, “which initially makes him an object of terror. Pym’s description mentions that his ruling expression may be conceived when it is considered that the teeth were exceedingly long and protruding, and never even partially covered, in any instance, by the lips”. “To pass this man with a casual glance, one might imagine him to be convulsed with laughter; but a second look would induce a shuddering acknowledgement, that if such an expression were indicative of merriment, the merriment must be that of a demon” (Poe 1965, 778). This account/chronicling evinces “a hybridity of its own, defining Peter as part animal, part demon, as warped by nature and as a supernatural subject” (Smith 2000, 198). There is also anecdotal information about him, and “[t]hese anecdotes went to prove his prodigious strength when under excitement, and some of them had given rise to a doubt of his sanity” (Ibid, 777). “Unnatural physicality and madness define him, the novel suggesting that the two terms are interchangeable,” Smith concludes.

I would presume to assert, at this point, that, equally horrific as the abysmal space of the pit in the “Pit and the Pendulum”, hybridity, a theme explored at leisure not only in “Pym”, but also in “The Man that

was Used Up” or “The Psyche Zenobia” can convey the nothingness, that is the *Nachträglichkeit* of trauma, since “the all too graphic pictures of mutilated limbs or disfigured faces, like all atrocity stories, only induce a numbing of response” (Bainbridge and Radstone 2007, 137). Zenobia’s outrageous butchery verges on downright unlikeliness. Her neck is detached from her body, but after her eyes had popped out of her head from the “pressure.” Meanwhile, she strives to make a record of her perceptions, from the terror of first comprehension, to feelings that become “indistinct and confused,” to outlandish delusions. She experiences an utter disconnection from her identity, witnessing firstly one eye, then the other leave her body. The first eye behaves affectedly and shows off: “Such a winking and blinking were never before seen” and, due to the “sympathy which always exists between two eyes of the same head,” she is forced “to wink and to blink, whether I would or not, in exact concert with the scoundrelly thing that lay just under my nose” (Poe 1965, 295). Such a representation of divided self, which mirrors Jay Lifton’s doubled, traumatised self, is amplified the moment her head is completely severed, and falls on the pavement: “My senses were here and there at one and the same moment with my head I imagined, at one time, that the head, was the real Signora Psyche Zenobia – at another I felt convinced that myself, the body, was the proper identity” (Ibidem).

The last analysis in this article will attempt to tackle a source of trauma which I announced to be the instantiation of speechless trauma in Poe’s fiction, namely the death equivalent of ultimate meaninglessness. “Silence” originally named “Siope,” is primarily spoken/ narrated by a demon who describes a dreary desert region where there is a huge rock on the shore of a river. Engraved on the rock is the word DESOLATION. A man, whose face shows sorrow, weariness, and disgust with mankind, stands on the summit of the rock as a demon tries to move him. The demon first tries the curse of tumult and brings a tempest, but the man is unmoved; then he tries the curse of silence, and indeed the characters on the rock change to SILENCE. When the man listens but hears nothing, he is terrified and runs away. Like “Shadow,” the story reflects the fear of nonbeing, the terror of the loss of individuality. Whereas the Shadow is a nonentity made up of entities, Silence is but a word that does not speak. And indeed, as Poe’s more developed fictions show, it is nothingness that terrifies; it is that which cannot be spoken that constitutes the ultimate horror. If

words have power, then that which cannot be spoken leaves man powerless. (Herzog 2024)

Charles May claims that Poe, as well as many of his storytellers are “practitioners of word-magic. They believe that there is a natural (or supernatural) connection between the word and what it names – not merely a conventional semantic relationship” (2011, 9). Given that such word magic only exists, for Poe, in the realm of art, where things exist only by virtue of words, silence becomes equated with superlative dread, inasmuch as it references ultimate nonbeing.

Coda

Dividedness, fragmentariness, hybridity, ultimate nonbeing, attended with a posse of anxieties, all come to represent, textually, representations of dread for Edgar Allan Poe, instantiations of low-level trauma, the trauma of meaninglessness, which is only partially cognised and whose inscription is delayed. I will conclude arguing, in all fairness, that the “terror of the soul” Poe underscored at the beginning of his collection of tales can now be traced to its origin: the dread of (undying) death and its equivalents, which abides in all words we read and “whereof one cannot speak.”

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