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**"Es lässt sich nicht lesen":
Poe and the Inscrutable**

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"Terror," Poe famously wrote, "is not of Germany, but of the soul." Responding to the charge of that his tales exhibit "Germanism," Poe writes in the preface to his *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* that he "deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results." This terror is rightly associated with both the grotesque and the arabesque, that is, with the horrifically unfamiliar, as well as bizarre and complicated. Such terror is associated with the unknown, with a fear of the unknown; more fearsome still is the *unknowable*, the dim and gloomy sense that what is at first merely unfamiliar and perplexing is actually inscrutable, something that we cannot really understand. As Poe notes, the soul is both the source of terror and the ground upon which it unfolds, and yet the soul is also the seat of

knowledge, the Cartesian *res cogitans* that is supposed to impose the rational meaning upon the world and hence, in the Enlightenment project of demystification, to remove the terrors of the unknowable. In Poe, this terror reasserts itself emphatically, as the terror of inscrutability itself.

Poe begins and ends his enigmatic study of the man of the crowd with the phrase (in reference to an unnamed German book), "it does not permit itself to be read." The tale, or sketch, emphasizes this point as the narrator follows his curious but *illegible* subject for several hours, but he is unable to bring his reader any closer to understanding - to really *knowing* - this "man of the crowd." This story, like others in Poe's oeuvre, pretends to offer a kind of fictional anthropology, a pseudo-science that will grant us a vista into the unknown in order to solve a riddle posed by it, only to pull the rug out from under us. At the end of the tale, the mysterious figure remains a mystery; the hieroglyphic remains indecipherable. "The Man of the Crowd" is itself a tale that doesn't allow itself to be read. *Es lässt sich nicht lesen.* The same observation might apply to much of Poe's work, in which inscrutability is the basis for the terror.

Poe's work actively defies interpretation, at times subtly and at others overtly undermining the reader's assumptions that the story's "meaning" will reveal itself. In some tales, like the detective stories, "Descent into the Maelstrom," or "The Gold Bug", Poe is willing to offer an explanation, but more often than not, Poe's texts frustrate the desire for comprehension.

In Poe's first published tale, "MS. Found in a Bottle," the unnamed narrator's thrill of "discovery" literally descends into the unknown and the *unknowable*. While the conceit manifested in the title assures the reader that the tale is authentic, the narration belies it, as it begins in a calm, dry, reflective autobiographical style (including the past or perfect tense), then moves to a more fragmentary style of diary entries, then breathlessly scrawls its message as the mysterious ship plunges into the vortex.

Examples:

(1) [*first lines*] Of my country and my family I **have** little to say. Ill usage and length of years **have driven** me from the one, and **estranged** me from the other. (51)

(2) [*midpoint*] It is long since I first trod the deck of this terrible ship, and the rays of my destiny **are**, I think, gathering into focus. (57)

(3) [*final lines*] But little time **will be left** me to ponder upon my destiny - the circles rapidly grow small - we **are plunging** madly within the grasp of the whirlpool - and amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering, oh God! and - going down. (61)

Elsewhere (in my essay, "The Poetics of Descent"), I have suggested that Poe uses this narration to undermine the personal narrative form, which became so popular in the 1830s and 1840s. The popularity of personal narratives lay, in large part, in their ability to present scientific or quasi-scientific knowledge about the exotic regions their first-person narrators had explored. (Examples include Dana's *Two Years before the Mast*, Douglass's slave narrative, Melville's *Typee*, or even Poe's own *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which for years was published as a nonfiction travel narrative, despite its utterly fantastic story. [And, in a bit of a joke for us 19th-century Americanists, this was the same publisher, Harper and

Brothers, who turned down the manuscript for Melville's *Typee* on the grounds that "it was impossible that it could be true and *therefore* was without real value" (Leyda 196).]) Whereas the personal narrative form aimed at making the unfamiliar familiar, domesticating the foreign, or just making the unknown known, Poe's perversion of the form, in "MS. Found in a Bottle" (and in *Pym*), strikingly asserts the inscrutability and unknowability of these uncanny experiences or events - perhaps, at the risk of being accused of "Germanism" again, we might label the events *unheimlich*, after Freud and Heidegger, who emphasize the not-at-home-ness (Heidegger actually uses the term *das Nicht-zuhause-sein*) implicit in the *uncanny* (or un-home-ly).

In tales of terror (such as "The Fall of the House of Usher" or "Ligeia"), Poe deliberately puzzles his readers, leading them to imagine a stable meaning that then will not hold. The horror of Poe's tales lies not in a particular fright, but in a general mood of uncertainty. Again and again, Poe presents the arcane, the exotic, the otherworldly, or unique, but he refuses to explicate in detail the foreign matter and to bring it into a safe and familiar intellectual archive. On the contrary, Poe's work frequently undermines the scientific or pseudo-scientific

practices of reading the meaning of events from their surfaces (empiricism); Poe injects uncertainty into such proceedings. Even in the detailed science-fiction of a work like "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," which is written like a medical case study, the horror of the inexplicable and unknowable undermines the scientific knowledge it purports to present.

Indeed, Poe's work itself does not let itself be read. The mysteries, or "tales of ratiocination," would seem to offer counter-examples, but even in them, Poe does not really give the reader the satisfaction of interpreting clues and gaining knowledge. Rather than offering a puzzle - like a crossword or a sudoku - where pleasure derives from *figuring it out*, Poe insists on insoluble puzzling. The detective fiction would seem to be the very model for pleasurable puzzle-solving, but, in the Dupin stories, Poe continues to emphasize the inscrutability of his subject. Unlike later examples in the genre, Poe's tales do not really invite the readers to "play" the detective, to solve the mystery themselves. Rather, Poe places the reader in the position of the perplexed observer who will marvel at the genius of the one who actually *can* figure things out. Auguste Dupin's analytical prowess is itself a marvel, and Dupin's powers lie in his own uncanny ability to *read* -

whether he is *reading* clues (as in the Rue Morgue) or *reading* people (as in "The Purloined Letter"). We, the readers, cannot *read* in the same way. Dupin, whose character is introduced only after the fine distinction is made between the chess-player (who merely calculates) and the draughts- or whist-player (who must also be able to read his or her opponent), represents an ideal reader that Poe's work does not, in the end, permit. We are not Dupin, and the text does not let itself be read.

In his quarter-deck speech explaining why he must pursue Moby Dick, Ahab tells Starbuck and the crew: "He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. *That **inscrutable** thing is what I chiefly hate;* and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him" (178, my emphasis). It seems that it is really *the whale's* inscrutability (rather than the inscrutability of the underlying "malice") that is most hated. In *Moby-Dick*, the inability to read and know the whale is a concern throughout the novel, as Ishmael's cetological system must remain [QUOTE:] "a draught of a draught" and the Leviathan [QUOTE:] "must remain unpainted to the last." In the context of a society self-consciously fashioning itself as a model for future successes, such inscrutability appears

as a real terror, a repressed but urgent, unconscious tainting of that "optative mood" and "progressive" vision of mid-nineteenth-century American thought.

This is what Harry Levin discussed years ago in his wonderful study, *The Powers of Blackness*, where he says "our [meaning Americans'] most perceptive minds have distinguished themselves from our popular spokesmen by concentrating on the dark half of the situation" (7). Tocqueville recognized that American ideology imbued with dreams of scientific and social progress - progress based in part on the firm belief that knowledge will helpfully expand horizons and that the world and everything in it are indeed legible (is not the very label, "American Renaissance," an acknowledgement of this hope?); but Levin explores that other part of America, the subterranean or darkly romantic vision of an utterly mysterious, illegible world. Melville and Hawthorne picked up on it, and Poe made such terror his stock in trade.

With Poe, inscrutability is the constant, lurking menace, thwarting our sense of sense-making and troubling our confidence in *knowing* at all. Like the purloined letter, the text and its desired meaning dangle right before our eyes, without our being able to comprehend it in any definitive way. The inscrutability of Poe's tales is

at the very heart of their reading. We, like Poe's narrator in "The Man of the Crowd," can marvel at the enigma before us, but we cannot understand. That narrator begins his tale by noting that men "die with despair of heart and convulsion of throat, on account of the hideousness of mysteries that will not *suffer themselves* to be revealed" (131). But, by the end of his long night of fruitlessly investigating the mysterious "man of the crowd," the narrator changes his tune. Given what greater terrors might be found if we truly could look into those inscrutable mysteries, "perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that *es lässt sich nicht lesen.*"