

CHAPTER FOUR

THE POETICS OF DESCENT: IRREVERSIBLE NARRATIVE IN POE'S "MS. FOUND IN A BOTTLE"

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Many of the most popular and still valued tales in nineteenth-century American literature were personal narratives. These included such nonfictional accounts as Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years before the Mast*, Herman Melville's *Typee*, or even Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, as well as more fantastic voyages such as Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. For the most part, these personal narratives followed a recognizable descent-and-return trajectory: the narrator, who is also usually the protagonist, ventures away from home and into some exotic locale or situation, only to return home safely, usually wiser or otherwise better for having made the trip. The narrator's formula might look like this: (1) Here I am, readers, one of you; (2) I ventured into this exotic or mysterious or terrifying place; and (3) I have returned now to tell the tale.¹ This narrative formula is equally effective in fictional or nonfictional accounts, allowing the reader to marvel in the foreign experience while taking comfort in the return to more familiar environs. Operating like Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*, the return marks the significance of the voyage, imbuing the story with authenticity as well as authority.

The allegorical significance of this descent-and-return formula is manifest in religious literature going back at least to Dante, and Dante's re-emergence from the *Inferno* might be considered the *Ur-text* of these later spiritual voyages. This rhetorical model is also employed in such early American writings as Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative (1682) and Jonathan Edwards's personal narrative (1743). These texts recall and reconstitute that American Jeremiad in which the errant pilgrim descends into the wilderness (literally and/or figuratively), often as divine retribution for his or her worldly sins; at this point, the pilgrim repents and, by the grace of God, is released, returning to the mainstream or dominant culture, now with a tale to tell.² As Sacvan Bercovitch

and others have noted, this American Jeremiad becomes the basis for a national cultural rhetoric, even where the religious component—seemingly essential to the Puritan jeremiads—has disappeared. In nineteenth-century America, such narratives also had the effect of establishing and reinforcing a kind of national narrative, with a distinctly national or representative subject (an American Adam, or the individual agent acting as narrator), an exemplary scene (the Virgin Land), and particular national mission or project (the errand into the wilderness).³ Ideologically, at least, such a “narrative of return” functioned to explore, reveal, and ultimately homogenize foreign realms and experiences, incorporating them into a national metanarrative in which the return was also a rebirth, a second flowering of some idealized past moment—in other words, an American Renaissance.

The personal narrative of the individual traveler, descending into some lower station (a lower class or primitive culture, for instance), only to return to his or her rightful place a better person, especially in its representative movement—the descent-and-return formula—fits well within the framework of American national narrative. Jonathan Arac observes that national narrative is not necessarily fixed and unchanging; nineteenth-century national narrative “was part of the process by which the nation was forming itself and not merely a reflection of an accomplished fact.”⁴ Although personal narratives, in Arac’s view, are quite distinct from national narrative, they often served the purposes of the national. The authority of the personal narrative lies in the individual narrator, who may nevertheless be representative of the nation as a whole. In this manner, the seemingly individualized personal narrative functions as a kind of prelude to, as well as embodiment of, national narrative; through narrative, the national and the individual lend each other authority.

By colonizing places and kinds of experience, the narrator also domesticates them, bringing the exotic “home” to the readers. Hence, this operates as a model of knowledge production, where the *unknown* becomes known through the narrative. The very word, *narrative*, has its etymological roots in *knowing* (from the Latin *gnarus*, from which the word *ignorance* also derives), and personal narratives tended to involve quasi-scientific reports from the periphery. The authority of the narrator/observer rested in the eyewitness account, and the narrative form itself thus operated as an instrument of knowledge production. In this form, the metropolitan narrator, returning from the wilderness, assumes control over the narrative and, in some cases, over events within that narrative. The personal narrative form allows the central narrative voice to present and represent the exotic content, homogenizing the experiences within a familiar framework. Hence the knowledge of the other, of the exotic or peripheral experience, is produced and disseminated within the structure of the dominant

culture vis-à-vis the narrative form. In returning to tell the tale, the narrator drags these foreign experiences back into the national center.

But what happens when the narrator does not come back, when there is no return? What if, as in Edgar Allan Poe's "MS. Found in a Bottle," the story is just that, *found*, floating in a bottle? The narrative exists, apparently, because the narrator does not. (Presumably, the tale would be quite different had the narrator *returned* to tell the tale.) Here, the comfortable and comforting images of return and rebirth founder. From the reader's point of view, the manuscript is a curiosity, an accidental voyage by an unwitting participant to uncharted domains from which there can be no return. The adventure is itself an accident, the observations are fleeting, the mysteries observed remain unexplained, and the end admits of no possible redemption or resurrection (literally!). "MS. Found in a Bottle" is an example of what might be termed an "irreversible narrative." In Poe's case, the narrative exhibits certain characteristics that place it squarely at odds with personal and national narratives that dominated American literature during his career. The irreversibility of the tale marks a moment in what I am calling Poe's *poetics of descent*, an aesthetic based largely on fleeting, ineffable, and ineluctable experience.

This poetics of descent informs the narrative presented in "MS. Found in a Bottle," inasmuch as the story details a real descent, a fall into an otherworldly maelstrom from which there is no return (unlike, of course, that of Poe's "Descent into the Maelstrom"). But even beyond the plot of the narrative, which certainly has a downward trajectory and entirely lacks a buoyant "return," the irreversibility of that narrative marks it as one of inevitable descent. Specifically, the tale does not allow for the model of return that would offer meaning to the fantastic voyage. Unlike the popular personal narratives of the mid-nineteenth century, it does not offer an occasion to domesticate the foreign experience, to "know" it or make it familiar. The discovery, as we will see, does not illuminate the subject, but casts the mystery into an even more mysterious gloom. Without the possibility of return, the tale has a unidirectional and irreversible movement that heaps discomfort onto uncertainty. The messianic possibilities of personal narrative, especially when allied with the providential mission of national narrative, founder on the rocks—or, perhaps, are submerged in the undertow—of Poe's poetics of descent.

1. An American Anomaly

Although he had previously published works of poetry, "MS. Found in a Bottle," written in 1833, is Poe's first short story. It is not a *personal narrative*, in the sense that Arac uses the term, but "MS. Found in a Bottle" does follow that form's conventions, even while also undermining the expectations a reader

would have of the genre. The title alone suggests that the narrator cannot be known (after all, he is not available to tell the tale); the expectation that the *unknown* will become known is itself somewhat frustrated in advance. When the reader has completed the story, very little has actually been revealed. Although there are numerous elements in common between this irreversible narrative and the personal narratives of the era, in Poe's story these elements are modified, twisted or distorted in such a way that the very knowledge the narrative sets out to display descends into an all-consuming *unknown*. The poetics of descent, as evidenced in the irreversible "MS.," contrast sharply with that optative mood and redemptive spirit visible in much of the work of Poe's celebrated contemporaries.

Of course, it is not surprising to hear that Poe is at odds with his contemporaries, or that he does not fit neatly within this or that version of an American national culture. Poe has always been the great anomaly in American literature (which no doubt contributes to his popularity in France). One thinks of F.O. Matthiessen's great snub in leaving Poe out of his field-establishing *American Renaissance*, for example.⁵ Even after a new generation of literary critics rehabilitated Poe, restoring him to his place in the pantheon of American letters, his anomalous status remains. For one thing, there's the problem of genre: it is not always clear what kind of texts Poe has produced.⁶ Where does Poe "fit" within American literature? In Arac's examination of narrative forms, *national narrative* became established as the dominant form in the nineteenth century, but it had to compete with *local* and *personal* narratives; *literary* narrative (embodied in such works as *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick*) enjoyed only a brief moment, around 1850, before its evanescence during the Civil War crisis, although such literary narratives have been the subjects of serious study in the humanities from Matthiessen's day to our own. Interestingly, Poe figures prominently in three of Arac's four categories (unsurprisingly, Poe has nothing much to do with *national narrative*). That he can represent three different categories is itself odd, but within each category Poe is also an anomaly. For instance, whereas the other writers of *local* narrative discussed by Arac are clearly also *regional* writers—e.g., Washington Irving's Dutch New York in *The Sketch Book*, Hawthorne's New England, and the bucolic backwoods of the Southwestern Humorists—Poe's tales are not localized in any particular region.⁷ And unlike the personal narratives of Dana, Francis Parkman, Thoreau, and even Melville, Poe's personal narrative (*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*) is not even loosely based on fact; it is a work of pure fantasy, and Poe certainly did not *actually* take a voyage like Pym's.⁸ Finally, although Poe's critical theory and his embrace of German and English Romanticism paves the way for *literary* narrative, it is the romances of Hawthorne and Melville that typify that form. Thus, even where

Poe is closely involved in the making of an American literary tradition, he remains outside of it.

Poe's alterity may be figured as well in another aspect of his tales: fatalism. Fate, with its attendant problem of individual agency, looms large in literary narratives, especially in Romantic literature.⁹ Fatalism might be viewed as almost archetypically un-American, since a founding ideology of the nation is individualism. As Alexis de Tocqueville, who actually coined the term *individualism*, put it in *Democracy in America*, economically self-reliant individuals "owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny lies in their hands."¹⁰ It is but a short step from this latter phrase to John O'Sullivan's term, *manifest destiny*; if Americans believe in fate, it is only that fate created by themselves. This self-determination lies at the heart of American national narrative. Yet throughout Poe's works, individual agency is constantly questioned, undermined, or flatly denied.¹¹ Fate, which so neatly yet problematically combines necessity and chance, is the underlying principle of Poe's irreversible narrative. Unlike those stories that might champion the individual agent, "MS. Found in a Bottle" emphasizes the degree to which the principal character (the first-person narrator) has little or no control over the events befalling him. Not only does the individual lack the agency to control his environment, but the events are ineluctable: the necessary results of causes set in motion without the narrator's input or knowledge. Thus, in the irreversible narrative, there is no backwards-looking or second-guessing, no sense that, if only things had been done differently, this would not have happened. The narrator is, quite literally and quite figuratively, at sea.

In "MS. Found in a Bottle," this is also reinscribed in the form that the narrative takes. Often, Poe's narrators—who should be the ones controlling the presentation of the events in the narrative—are caught up in the narrative and the narration, such that they seem to be out of control (or are controlled by some other force, fate or chance). Obviously, in "MS. Found in a Bottle," the form is that of the irreversibly written narrative. The "author" of the narrative is dead or irretrievably lost. The titular conceit, that the narrative is found, indicates the text itself is merely the trace left behind. The structure of the narrative is similar to that used by Poe again and again in later tales: An introductory section tells us a bit about the narrator, a middle section describes the strange events befalling him, and a quick final section marks the hurried and irreversible end.¹² This irreversibility is emphasized in the pace of the narrative. Poe's principal temporal technique is acceleration. The pace of many of Poe's tales frequently moves from slow to fast, from long discursive introductions in which little but background is offered, to a speeded up middle that frantically attempts to

describe the inexplicable, then rushing on to an end designed to leave one breathless and without hope for resolution (rarely is there denouement or coda, for example). The end—which, when it comes, comes quickly—is inevitable.

All of this functions to undermine (or, at least, problematize) that optative mood, with its messianic promise, that held sway over so many writers in mid-nineteenth-century American letters. Poe's irreversible narrative points to a different way of thinking, not only about the individual in relation to the cosmos, but about the nation's role and position in history. The imagery is not of return, rebirth, or rising but of *descent*, ineluctable and irreversible, into the unknown. As noted above, the very word, *narrative*, is rooted in knowledge, and suggests a straightforward setting forth of facts. Poe's irreversible narrative appears to do just that, calmly laying out the facts before the reader, only to pull the rug out, shocking the reader, and offering an unexpected (and, perhaps, not altogether pleasant) experience of the unknown.¹³ This unknown may be the scariest aspect of Poe's irreversible narrative, inasmuch as it undermines the guiding principles of personal and national narrative. Whereas personal narrative shone a light on the dark places of the world and of society, illuminating unknown experiences that could then become part of the dominant national culture—a national culture that, itself, was to be a beacon for enlightening the rest of the world—Poe's perverse, anomalous narratives presented the darkness only to plunge the reader into a deeper darkness below.

2. Irreversible Descent

Let us examine this process in “MS. Found in a Bottle.”¹⁴ We are told at the outset that the unnamed narrator is himself an outsider: “Of my country and family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other” (“MS.” 1). It is neither a “Call me Ishmael” nor a “My name is Arthur Gordon Pym” beginning, although it might foreshadow either. Lacking nation and family, the narrator goes on to note that “Hereditary wealth afforded me an education of no common order,” a line with a dual function. It emphasizes his orphan status (he is a legatee of dead ancestors), and it serves to explain why such literate prose writing might be found floating in a bottle (he is no common sailor, but a well-educated traveler). The narrator then informs us that his education has led him to be scrupulously scientific: “I have often been reproached for the aridity of my genius; a deficiency of imagination has been imputed to me as a crime.” In other words, he is skeptical and truthful, and in no way is he susceptible to flights of fancy. This self-characterization is crucial to establishing the *truth* of what follows. “I have thought it proper to premise thus much, lest the incredible tale I have to tell should be considered rather the raving of a crude imagination, than the positive

experience of a mind to which the reveries of fancy have been a dead letter and a nullity" (2). The first paragraph, then, sets forth what the narrator is—a man without family or country, committed to scientific principles, skeptical—if not who he is. The narrator's namelessness further complicates the personal narrative form, since the reader is given no sign to attach to the narrative. We are assured that the narrative is this or that, but we still do not know him. The personal aspect of this first-person narrative is not explored.

The commitment to truth-telling, to *narrative* in the narrow (etymological) sense, is a common ruse in Poe's fiction.¹⁵ Poe's later tales frequently begin with a narrator attesting to his truthfulness and sanity, thus peremptorily demanding credibility from a potentially incredulous audience. "MS. Found in a Bottle" actually includes an epigraph attesting to the truthfulness of the account, in addition to the narrator's plea for credibility. The epigraph reads:

*Qui n'a plus qu'un moment à vivre
N'a plus rien à dissimuler.* — Quinault — *Atys*.

["He who has but a moment to live no longer has anything to dissimulate."]

While it might strain the credulity of the reader to imagine this unnamed narrator inscribing a quote from Quinault—*en français*, no less—just before plunging into the abyss, the epigraph adds the extra assurance that the tale must be true. Not only will the narrator assure us that he does not subscribe to fanciful thoughts, that he has no talent for imaginative fiction, but he has no reason to lie even if he were so inclined. This entire truth-telling apparatus, constructed by Poe at the start of the tale, emphasizes the knowledge-production to come. In effect, these assurances tell the reader, "Get ready, something important is about to be revealed." Of course, Poe is really just setting his readers up; although many curious things will be described, the revelation will not happen. Instead, the giddy anticipation of newfound knowledge will give way to the horrifying descent into a further unknown.

Preliminaries out of the way in the first paragraph, the narrator gets on with the story. After many years of foreign travel, he set sail again as a passenger from Java on a large cargo ship. Later in the voyage, caught in the doldrums and becalmed for some time, the ship was suddenly "blasted" by a "Simoom," which managed to kill everyone aboard except the narrator and an "old Swede" (2–4). Dismasted, the hulk of the ship is at the mercy of the storm, and the wind blew it steadily Southeast by South for five straight days, until the sun appeared sickly and pale, "a dull and sullen glow" (5). The sixth day did not come; they were "enshrouded" in "eternal night" (5–6). Here the swells were mountainous: "At times we gasped for breath at an elevation beyond the albatross—at times became dizzy with the velocity of our descent into some watery hell" of the trough (6–7). At the bottom of one of these "abysses," the narrator and the

Swede saw high above them a gigantic ship, under full sail, riding the crest of the wave, “pausing on the giddy pinnacle”. . . and coming down (7). The narrator stumbled aft, just in time to be flung into the rigging of the spectral ship as it crushed the narrator’s poor bark (and with it, the Swede) underneath. The narrator, fearful of the eerie crew, then hid aboard his strange new craft. The one crewmember he did see, an ancient mariner whose aspect mixed the “peevisishness of a second childhood” with the “solemn dignity of a God” (8–9), murmured in some unknown language. Here the narrative pauses.

The pause serves several purposes. It reminds the reader that this is supposed to be a “found manuscript.” It is not the artfully written account, with patient editorial assistance and invested with personal authority. Heretofore, the narrative has been one continuous short story, providing background, and then describing events as they had occurred. The format was consistent with a personal narrative, of the type that would seem to follow a familiar descent-and-return formula. Now the narrative form changes, along with the style of narration. Broken up by a series of asterisks, which indicates that what follows is a new “entry,” the next paragraph also marks its difference by changes both tone and tense.

A feeling, for which I have no name, has taken possession of my soul—a sensation which will admit of no analysis, to which the lessons of by-gone times are inadequate, and for which I fear futurity itself will offer me no key. To a mind constituted like my own, the latter consideration is an evil. I shall never—I know that I shall never—be satisfied with regard to the nature of my conceptions. Yet it is not wonderful that these conceptions are indefinite, since they have their origin in sources so utterly novel. A new sense—a new entity is added to my soul. (9)

The transition to the present tense marks a divergence from the assumed genre of personal narrative to something else. Suddenly, the story is no longer an account of past experiences as much as a hasty recording of present (or near present) perceptions. The change in tense is awkward here. It functions to jar the reader out of the typical suspension of disbelief, reminding him or her that the narrative is an *ad hoc* or contingent tale, not a carefully crafted story—which, of course, it is precisely what it is: that’s the great hoax implied by the title and the tale.

The transition also, implicitly, calls into question the narrator’s authority, even as it insists on his character’s integrity (that is, his abhorrence of the mysterious and inexplicable). The authoritative personal narrator, whose authority lies principally in his faithful representation of events personally experienced, gives way to a sort of baffled onlooker. This does not in itself discredit the narrator, but it does invite the reader to question the calm,

authoritative tone of what came before. Surely, the narrator's authority is compromised when the narrative disintegrates midway through. The stolid, straightforward narration of first eight pages is interrupted by this new kind of narrating, one that specifically questions its own ability. The narrator introduces "a new entity," an inscrutable and inexplicable novelty, which changes the nature of the game. Up to this point, the story follows the appropriate pattern of personal narrative, inasmuch as it details an odd voyage into the unknown, registering its oddness even as it brings the tale back to the familiar—a ripping yarn to be recounted by the fireside. Now, it is something else, something disturbing and ominous. The narrator's "evil" consideration—that he will be unable to analyze, explain, or in the future *know* what has happened to him—becomes a figure of the ineffable narrative itself.

Following this awkward break, "MS. Found in a Bottle" presents a paragraph of pseudo-explanation, offering further confusion to a close reader. The narrator describes the mysterious crew ("Incomprehensible men!"), and notes that he no longer needs to hide from them: "Concealment is utter folly on my part, for the people *will not see*" (9). As incredible as this revelation might be, more incredible are the next few lines, in which the narrator offers the physical explanation for the existence of the narrative itself. After disclosing that he snatched the writing materials ("with which I write, and have written") from the captain's cabin, the narrator promises to continue his journal "from time to time," and he vows to transmit it to the public somehow. "At the last moment I will enclose the MS. in a bottle, and cast it into the sea" (9–10).

Although this paragraph serves to answer some pesky questions troubling the narrative thus far—Why does this writing exist? How was it accomplished? How did it come to be found in a bottle?—it raises others that are, perhaps, more troubling still. First of all, would a careful reader not be shocked to see that this paragraph (and the last one!) was actually written after the straightforward eight-page narration? If the narrator can calmly describe himself, his history and temperament, his voyage and its calamity, and the mysterious situation in which he now finds himself for eight pages, then why the rude interruption, with its present tense and metaphysical tone? Why change the narrative from reflective, personal narrative of the past to a diary of current events and impressions? And, most distressingly, if he is now speaking in a strict present tense, how does the narrator know that the end is coming, that he may have to throw a manuscript in a bottle overboard? Doesn't this suggest a breakdown between the author (Poe) and the narrative voice of the "MS.?"

A short, but ultimately unsatisfying, answer to these questions may be that Poe simply erred, much as he did in allowing the many inconsistencies in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* to stand.¹⁶ A better explanation, one might argue, is that Poe decided to ratchet up the urgency of the narrative by

introducing the break at the midway point. I mentioned above the matter of pace, and acceleration seems to be a salient feature of many of Poe's tales. Again and again in Poe's short fiction, the measured setting forth of the facts of the case ultimately yields to the hurried, even frenzied, scribbling down of events *as they are happening*, thus making the narrator and the reader breathless in the effort to capture the meaning of the event before it evanesces. Poe's awkward little paragraphs, placed squarely in the center of "MS. Found in a Bottle," mark this transition directly, and warn the reader that he or she is on the brink of the great cataract and that she or he might want to adjust the level of apprehension accordingly. The seemingly awkward, even mistaken, break thus functions as a meticulously constructed device employed to elicit a particular sensation.

It also, of course, marks the narrative as irreversible. At this point, Poe indicates, the narrative seems to cross the point of no return. In other words, the story will ineluctably descend into its conclusion, without potential for a return to normalcy. The next paragraph, in what might be considered the concluding scene of this middle or transitional act, emphasizes this abnormalcy with a strange depiction of an uncanny event. This paragraph introduces the second half of the narrative, as the skeptical and scientific narrator is forced to wonder: "Are such things the operation of unguided Chance?" While pondering his remarkable fate, the narrator had "unwittingly daubed with a tar brush the edges of a neatly-folded studding-sail." Later, when the sail is raised, "the thoughtless touches of the brush are spread out in the word DISCOVERY" (10). Here the entry ends, leaving the reader to wonder what significance, if any, the remarkable coincidence carries.

This "Discovery" paragraph directly announces the theme of newfound knowledge, but does so by explicitly invoking "the operation of unguided Chance." The knowledge to be gained, the discovery, does not necessarily follow from the personal journey into the unknown and the narrative about it. Rather, the discovery is itself rooted in the uncertainty and contingency of chance. Fate, the absolute inevitability of circumstances, combines necessity and chance in a problematic way. In some respects, chance—involving as it does the random, the chaotic, the accidental or contingent—seems the opposite of necessity, which connotes certainty, design, purpose or intention. Necessity is not supposed to be the same as rolling the dice. Yet, as Gilles Deleuze has shown in his discussion of Nietzsche, the dice throw actually combines necessity and chance. "The dice which are thrown once are the affirmation of *chance*, the combination which they form on falling is the affirmation of *necessity*. . . . What Nietzsche calls *necessity* (destiny) is thus never the abolition but rather the combination of chance itself."¹⁷ Thus the affirmation of the aleatory is also an affirmation of fate. Nietzsche's *amor fati* thus becomes the love of both necessity and chance. Returning to "MS. Found in a Bottle," then,

the aleatoric principle relates to that fatalism in Poe that subsumes the positive effects of personal narrative—including the production of new knowledge, or of new data to be incorporated into an existing system of knowledge (such as that of national narrative). The supraindividual chance or fate, that which shocks the narrator and inspires in him awe at the seemingly inscrutable designs of the cosmos (or chaosmos, perhaps), function to further frustrate the expectation of the reader. We are alerted to the possibility of "Discovery," only to find no cognizable thing discovered. This little paragraph presents a wonder taken for a sign; the thing itself remains unreadable. Thus "the operation of ungoverned Chance" undermines our ability to attain the knowledge that the discovery was supposed to have revealed.

The several paragraphs that follow delineate the narrator's observations and surmises about the strange ship. Although the enormous ship is outfitted for battle, it is not a warship. Its aspects, like those of its crew, are altogether ancient, evoking in the narrator "an unaccountable memory of old foreign chronicles and ages long ago" (10). The ship's material is unknown, though it resembles some otherworldly version of Spanish oak, grown beyond all realistic size, as if sea itself has caused the ship to "grow in bulk like the living body of a seaman" (11). The crew members, like the one seen earlier, are ancient, marked by "hoary old age." About them lay scattered "mathematical instruments of the most quaint and obsolete construction" (10). The captain, likewise marked by "so utter, so extreme" old age, is surrounded by "strange, iron-clasped folios, and mouldering instruments of science, and obsolete long-forgotten charts" (12–13). Muttering in that same unknown foreign language used by the ancient sailor earlier, the captain is bent over "a paper which I took to be a commission, and which, at all events, bore the signature of a monarch" (13). All the while, the ship races southward at incredible speed, as if "under the influence of some strong current, or impetuous under-tow" (12).

The final paragraphs, as expected, emphasize the dizzying speed of the ship and the headlong rush towards—what? The narrator registers his horror by mentioning that he should be ashamed of his earlier fear, considering how much more frightening the elements have become: "shall I not stand aghast at a warring of wind and ocean, to convey any idea of which the words tornado and simoom are trivial and ineffective?" (13). But this terror is also mixed with excitement, the thrill of discovery hinted at in the tar-brush incident. "It is evident that we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge—some never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction" (14). The internal exhilaration at approaching the brink of a new knowledge and the external horror of wind and water and ice come together in the last lines, as the ship and its accidental stowaway plunge "madly within the grasp of the whirlpool." Breathlessly, and presumably scribbling furiously just before cramming the

pages into an appropriately buoyant receptacle, the narrator tells us that, “amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering, oh God! and—going down” (14–15).

This ending is abrupt, final, and inconclusive. The narrator’s *discovery* is unknown. A “secret” knowledge, “never-to-be-imparted,” the discovery lacks the structure to edify or enlighten. Unlike the personal narratives of the mid-nineteenth century, the experiences here described cannot be incorporated into a national narrative or mission. Discovering that a vast whirlpool lies at the South Pole would be a significant scientific discovery, but—unlike “The Balloon Hoax,” where Poe actually attempted to fool the public with a “true” report of a transatlantic balloon journey—“MS. Found in a Bottle” does not really pretend to be a scientific account, notwithstanding its narrator’s protestations. The presumptive voyage of exploration leads to a dead end.

In “Doodling America,” Mark Kinkead-Weekes has suggested that the spectral ship and its eerie crew are none other than Christopher Columbus’s. The references to the unknown language (Spanish?), the otherworldly *Spanish* oak, the obsolete (15th-century?) instruments, and the royal signature (King Ferdinand’s?) would lend support to this reading. But if Poe wished to invoke Columbus, the discoverer of the New World and thus, in a sense, the father (or grandfather) of America, he does not offer a Columbus that would serve national narrative very well. Perhaps like Tennyson’s Ulysses, this former adventurer longs for the open sea again. Or perhaps this weary voyage is his purgatory; he is doomed to sail the oceans searching for new discoveries. (Note that Poe’s narrator sees no signs of joy or wonder in the leader of this voyage of discovery). In any event, a reference to Columbus does not evoke any celebratory idea of nation formation. The discovery is not of a new world, a promised (virgin) land where a new people can take root. There is no triumphant return, reporting the newfound knowledge and dazzling the readers in the metropolitan center with tales of exotic locales. Again, the discovery, if any, is of an abyss.

Irreversible, this tale plunges the reader into an unknown without allowing a return to the normal or the familiar. Without the element of return, the eccentric, exotic, or unknown must remain that way. That is, it cannot be reclaimed by or incorporated into the dominant culture of which the tale’s readers are presumably a part. The *irreversibility* of this narrative is opposed to the *return* of other narratives, the latter assuming an ability to re-present the exotic material, now made familiar by the operations of the narrative form itself. The narrator’s return marks the narrative possibilities of knowing. In Poe’s irreversible narrative the unknown remains hauntingly and tantalizingly unknown.

3. Uncharted Territory

A curious note is appended to the "MS." The note did not appear in the original, but was added in 1840, and it would appear to be a note that explains something about the text. In the voice of Poe, not the narrator (of course), the note reads:

The "MS. Found in a Bottle," was originally published in 1831, and it was not until many years afterwards that I became acquainted with the maps of Mercator, in which the ocean is represented as rushing, by four mouths, into the (northern) Polar Gulf, to be absorbed into the bowels of the earth; the Pole itself being represented by a black rock, towering to a prodigious height.

The date is incorrect; the tale was first published in 1833. Once again the knowledge imparted in the tale is suspect, and the authority of the narrator (now Poe himself, apparently) is undermined. In fact, the note itself does not really *explain* anything at all. The reader's first response to learning that Poe later looked at Mercator's maps might well be, "So what?" Does this note attempt to reestablish the scientific quality of the narrative? Is it a *mea culpa*—Poe's admission that he erred by sending his narrator to the wrong Pole? Does the note change the way one now reads (or rereads) the tale? Certainly the reader does not care that Mercator's map differs from Poe's, particular since both are rather fanciful "maps." Perhaps Poe—now, in 1840, an established writer—returns to his first published prose work in order to make a statement about the nature of narrative itself.

The narrative of return necessarily functioned as a cartographic enterprise. That is, like the explorers of Mercator's era, personal narratives brought back the raw data (including geographic data) and re-presented it in an organized or systematic form. The narratives were themselves maps, filling in the hitherto blank spaces with newly discovered details, thus making sense of the unknown by representing it within a familiar structure of knowledge. With irreversible narrative, the mapping project unravels. Rather than assuming the ability to represent the uncanny and the unknown, Poe's irreversible narrative calls into question the means and the processes of representation. Lacking a return, the tale also lacks a clear representation. The skeptical and rational narrator, to his own horror, turns out to be unable to understand what is happening. The personal narrative form, which takes it as its fundamental project the making known that which was unknown, loses its ability to enlighten. The voyage of discovery cannot disclose that which is discovered. The effect of all of this is deeply alienating. That alienation may be figured as an inability to represent one's position within the world, or, in other words, the inability to map.¹⁸ The

collapse of personal narrative in Poe's tale allegorizes that alienation. Unable to accurately map, one is irretrievably lost.

The irreversible narrative presented in "MS. Found in a Bottle" challenges the established personal narrative form dominating mid-nineteenth-century American letters. Whether explicitly incorporating national narrative elements or merely serving national narrative through its form of knowledge production, personal narratives employed the figure of return to reinscribe a national ideology within a national culture still in formation. Poe's irreversible narrative—questioning the authority of narrative voices, openly acknowledging the operation of fate or chance, and disallowing any rehabilitation through return to normalcy—undermines the governing ethos of nineteenth-century American culture, as represented in many of its most popular stories. In "MS. Found in a Bottle," the inability to map, the failure of narrative to disclose the truth, the ineluctable downward trajectory into the unknown, all haunt the project of personal and national narrative, so assiduously undertaken by the writers of this era. The poetics of descent underscores Poe's anomalous power in American literature.

Notes

¹ The slave narrative is the exception to this formula. As Jonathan Arac notes, in slave narratives, the movement is one of ascent, from slavery to freedom (see Arac, *Emergence*, 77). That said, one could argue that even slave narratives partook of the descent-and-return formula, since there is usually a "hitting-bottom" within the narrative that leads to the ultimate push for freedom. For example, Frederick Douglass's encounter with Mr. Covey was clearly the "low" point in his life, especially compared to his earlier time as a "city slave" in Baltimore—"A city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation." "Mr. Covey had succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. . . the dark night of slavery closed in upon me, and behold a man transformed into a brute!" From that nadir, Douglass makes his emergence to freedom. See Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Dover, 1995), 21, 38.

² In these religious personal narratives, the instructive and theological value of the tale makes its telling a pilgrim's duty. For example, Rowlandson's narrative originally bore the title, *The Sovereignty & Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, Commended by her to all that Desire to Know the Lord's Doings to, and Dealings with Her. Especially to her Dear Children and Relations.*

³ See Donald Pease, "National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives," in Donald E. Pease, ed., *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), especially 3–4.

⁴ Arac, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820–1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3.

⁵ Although the principle reason Poe was left out was strictly historical—i.e., the book focused on works produced between 1850 and 1855, and Poe died in 1849—Matthiessen gives other reasons for excluding him. Unlike the other figures (Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman), "Poe was bitterly hostile to democracy," and "his value, even more than Emerson's, is now seen to consist in his influence rather than in the body of his own work." Matthiessen concludes that Poe's "stories, less harrowing upon the nerves as they were, seem relatively factitious when contrasted with the moral depth of Hawthorne and Melville" (F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1941], xii, n.3). That is, Poe was both un-American and artificial; he lacked both political and artistic authenticity.

⁶ See, for example, Joseph Ridgely, "Tragical-Mythical-Satirical-Hoaxical: Problems of Genre in *Pym*," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 24 (Fall 1974): 4–9.

⁷ Poe "did not have a well-established regional residence, nor do his writings draw upon local history, lore, and customs" (62), but Arac suggests that Poe's work represented local narrative by representing a distinctive type of locale—i.e., the city. Poe is really America's first *urban* writer, bringing the image of the city to bear on both his urban sketches (like "The Man of the Crowd") and his gloomy, though more rustically set, tales, such as "The Fall of the House of Usher."

⁸ This did not stop the publishers from advertising *Pym* as a work of travel (see Arac, *Emergence*, 100).

⁹ On the Romantic problem of agency, see Arac, *Emergence*, 171–180.

¹⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. by Phillips Bradley, trans. by Henry Reeve (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), Vol. II, 99.

¹¹ This is, of course, not unique to Poe. Romantic thought, whose avatar in the United States may very well have been Poe himself, often called action and agency into question. Indeed, such problematization of agency is one of the earmarks of *literary* narrative. One need only think of the references to fate that pervade *Moby-Dick*. See Arac, "'A Romantic Book': *Moby-Dick* and Novel Agency."

¹² Examples are multiple. In the "Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator "calmly" explains his story, beginning with the straightforward, retrospective narration of one telling what had happened; by the end, his frenzied narration is entirely in the present tense, speaking as much to the policemen in his tale as to the readers. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," pages pass full of the narrator's description of Roderick Usher, with patient attention to the details of his degenerating condition. The climax arrives quickly at the end, and within one paragraph the Ushers and their ancestral mansion have collapsed. Both tales offer glimpses of a poetics of descent.

¹³ There may be some question as to whether any truly new knowledge can be gained through the personal narrative form. Expectation, which would accompany the familiar form, assumes a particular kind of knowledge that is expected. As such, the personal narrative form can supply fresh data, augmenting the aggregate amount of information about a place or a people, but it probably cannot deliver new knowledge, that is, a new way of knowing. To use the famous Kuhnian example, such a form can augment

existing structures of knowledge—filling in the blanks on the periodic table, for instance—but it could not serve to mark a paradigm shift, by which the old questions get asked, and answered, differently.

¹⁴ Poe, “MS. Found in a Bottle,” in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, volume 11, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1965). Hereafter cited in the text.

¹⁵ See, for instance, “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar.”

¹⁶ For example, one thinks of Pym’s suggestion that he and his comrade—who actually dies during the course of the narrative—discussed matters of the narrative later.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 26.

¹⁸ This is essentially what Fredric Jameson means by cognitive mapping. Cognitive mapping enables one to represent, however provisionally and tentatively, one’s position within a social totality that has become, in the modern and postmodern world, largely unrepresentable. On this, see especially *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 51–54, 399–418.