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## Proper, Politic, and Fetishized Object: Representations of Body in the Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

PROPER, POLITIC, AND FETISHIZED OBJECT: REPRESENTATIONS OF BODY  
IN THE FICTION OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Courtney Glass

2019

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Courtney Glass, and entitled Proper, Politic, and Fetishized Object: Representations of Body in the Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Nathaniel Cadle

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Michael Gillespie

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Bruce Harvey, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 14, 2019

The thesis of Courtney Glass is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

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Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2019

## DEDICATION

For Dan. If not for your love, support, and confidence, this would not have been possible.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

PROPER, POLITIC, AND FETISHIZED OBJECT: REPRESENTATIONS OF BODY  
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by

Courtney Glass

Florida International University, 2019

Miami, Florida

Professor Bruce Harvey, Major Professor

This thesis involves a close-reading of how Edgar Allan Poe writes the body and how bodies operate as discursive spaces to explore identity, sexuality, gender, and society and are constructed and deconstructed. Consideration is given to how Poe challenges, destabilizes, and problematizes notions of the body exacerbated by abnormal bodies absenting themselves via death, decay, or prosthetics and the meaning that is gathered around either their conjunction or disjunction.

The introduction gives an overview of relevant Poe criticism and a rationale for this project. Chapter II explores Poe's treatment of the body-proper and identity in "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and a "Predicament." Chapter III looks at the body object in "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "Berenice." Chapter IV investigates how the body politic functions in "The Man of the Crowd" and "The Man that Was Used Up."

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## I. Introduction

“Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair! Nothing beside remains.” –Percy Bysshe

Shelley

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was a transitional writer during a transitional time. He had one foot firmly planted in the Romantic era, but as some critics such as Erlei Wang have argued, he was a forerunner of Modernism. Poe grew up idolizing Lord Byron and sought to emulate him in both his work and life. But Antebellum America was so fraught with tension among class, race, and gender that Poe’s personal life was also imbued with tension. The antagonism with his foster father, John Allan, would make it impossible for Poe to ever live the lifestyle he dreamed of<sup>1</sup>. He would also struggle with loss and mourning, including the death of his mother when he was three years old, the loss of other motherly figures Jane Mackenzie and Jane Stanard, the loss of love with the failed engagement to Elmira Royster, and the death of his bride, Virginia Clemm. He would also struggle with maintaining employment and earning a living wage throughout his short life.

Biographer Kenneth Silverman paints a picture of Poe as wanting to excel in all things because he “resembled many other orphans, in whom a feeling of nonexistence and the need to master changeable surroundings often produce a will for power. But even for what he lacked or had lost, there remained much to remind him of it” (25). Rumors abounded that he also struggled with alcoholism, drugs, and sanity, though it is difficult

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<sup>1</sup> John Allan and his wife Frances took in Poe when he was orphaned at age 3 but they never formally adopted him. Poe and Allan would have lifelong disputes.

to separate fact from fiction when it comes to these reports.<sup>2</sup> In short, every stage of Poe's life and career would be shaped and influenced by both external and internal pressures.

Unsurprisingly, his writings also explore liminal spaces, between life and death, absence and presence, beauty and grotesque, and perhaps most notably, body and mind. In his analysis of Poe, D.H. Lawrence wrote that there are two components of American art: the sloughing off of what he calls the old consciousness and the development of a new one. He contends Poe was "concerned with the disintegration-processes of his own psyche" (Lawrence 70). Poe's preoccupation with his own mind precedes the Freudian interest in psychoanalysis and Modernist fascination with isolated characters. Wang argues: "Poe's strong sense of spiritual alienation and isolation in society embodied in his literary protagonists provided a perfect model for the Modernists" (Wang 82). History traces the beginning of Modernism to Europe to the mid to late 1800s as a response to the emergence of urban life; however, the estrangement of Modernism perhaps occurred earlier in the American Romantic period because of a profound sense of isolation and social anomie.

Over the years, Poe's work has been the subject of analysis by some of the most respected literary critics –Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Barbara Johnson, to name a few. Critics have read his work for how it deals with the macabre, death, psychology, and monstrosity. Others have argued that Poe's treatment of themes like technology, chaos and order, and especially authorship, illustrates the anxieties about realities of the

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<sup>2</sup> Poe's reputation and legacy are heavily influenced by figures such as Rufus Griswold, who despised him and wrote slanderous reports about him following his death.

time in which he lived. Most recently, analysis centers on his representations of women and race. In my thesis, I examine how Poe constructs the body in his work.

Questions of the body are found throughout literary analysis, from psychoanalytical readings and feminist readings to contemporary queer readings. How an author constructs bodies can reveal much about his own unique historical time period and can further reveal the social and political forces that give them shape. Bodies may also tell us about the psychology of a character, her relationship to others, and her position in society, and define the boundaries of their being in a philosophical sense. In the *Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, Hillman and Maude note the interest in body studies dates to Foucault, “who foregrounded the centrality of the body in his discussion of knowledge, power and the regulation of physical difference and desire” (Hillman and Maude 5). They preface their analysis by declaring, “the body is notoriously difficult to theorize or pin down, because it is mutable, in perpetual flux, different from day to day and resistant to conceptual definition” (1). Historically, medical, political, and socio-economic authorities have had their own agendas in constructing bodies in very specific ways. Literature “works to remind us of this fact and thereby to deconstruct these myths, often by reinstating the delirium and the scandalousness of the body. For the body is never simply a passive depository of cultural fantasy or the workings of power; it resists all reification and fixity” (Hillman & Maude 6).

It is important to be conscious of how we read the body, what our various agendas are, and what embodied experiences we bring with us to the text. What the body is, does, and means is exceedingly difficult to reduce to a single definition. Even in the scientific

and medical communities, the way we understand and conceptualize bodies constantly changes. To this day, our definitions of life and death are tenuous at best –they are constantly the subjects of ethical, scientific, religious, and legal debate. One thing is certain, however. Bodies need other bodies. Walter Shear’s “Poe’s Fiction: The Hypnotic Magic of the Senses” argues that Poe’s characters are enclosed in hostile spaces that produce isolation forcing the characters to rely on their senses to understand their worlds. Agents without bodies are problematic as they prevent the characters from having a “socially meaningful relationship to the world” (Shear 276). Lacking such a relationship leaves the characters to face a world that is “almost fiendishly physical, one whose material nature they will come to regard as their chief obstacle” (Shear 276). Indeed, every single body needs another body to conceive it, grow it in utero, and push it out into the world. It needs bodies to nurture and sustain it through childhood. It needs others to experience pain and pleasure, what some argue to be the essence of human identity. Such experiences are never achieved by a single body; as Burgwinkle puts it: “one body is insufficient– even if that body belongs to an ascetic hermit” (qtd. in Hillman and Maude 6).

When it comes to Poe criticism, scholars have investigated how he writes the body in terms of gender, sexuality, violence, and disease. Aspasia Stephanou’s “Lovely Apparitions and Spiritualized Corpses” examines the relationship of nineteenth-century illness and vampirism. She argues that Poe’s tales of the pathologized female body are “shuddering examples of woman’s materialized spirit” (Stephanou 36). The consumptive female body, she claims, is the embodiment of evil that “consumes her blood from within” as she transcends her corporeal form in death (Stephanou 42). Diane Long

Hoeveler takes a similar feminist approach in “The Hidden God and the Abjected Woman in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” where she examines how “Madeline functions throughout the text as the abjected woman, the waste product of Roderick’s diseased mind, as well as the embodiment of the act of rejection itself” (Hoeveler 391).

Other critics have looked at how illness is romanticized in Poe’s tales and how they reflect the medical and popular discourse of disease in the nineteenth-century. In “Morbid Conditions: Poe and the Sublimity of Disease,” J. Alexandra McGhee claims that “accessing the sublime experience in Poe depends on a combination of perverseness, disease, and the uncanny” (McGhee 65). Kristen Renzi’s “Hysterical Vocalizations of the Female Body in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Berenice’” argues that “Poe’s treatment of illness and femininity in one such tale of a dying woman [...] offers a trenchant— if often overlooked—critique on the emerging pseudo-science of hysteria” (Renzi 603). Renzi suggests that “the death of a beautiful woman” in Poe’s writing goes beyond the aesthetic. The subject of dead women, she says, allows him to explore how gendered violence and miscommunication are products of the nineteenth-century’s obsession with hysteria. In “Resisting Reproduction in Edgar Allan Poe’s Family Fictions,” Paul Christian Jones argues that queerness is a form of resistance to the traditional idea of heterosexual reproduction when applied to Poe’s characters. In Chapter III, I will address other ways of reading the bodies in “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “Berenice,” as themes of the grotesque, queer, and gothic allow.

In “‘Tawdry Physical Affrightments’: The Performance of Normalizing Visions of the Body in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Loss of Breath,’” William Etter analyzes how “Loss of Breath” shows the “profoundly conservative nature of [Poe’s] vision of the body, a

vision that insists upon the enforcement of rigid, normalized conceptions of the body, the transgression of which results into aesthetic, social, and political absurdity” (Etter 6).

What Etter does not consider is that Poe was quite possibly satirizing the absurdity of such constructions to highlight their absurdity. In “Language and Body,” Andrew Bennett notes that one of the most prominent features of canonical Romanticism “is its intense interest in the act of composition itself – in other words, in the process of writing” (79). In his analysis of Wordsworth, he argues that cause and effect are conflated and that “writing and the body are prior to spirit, concept and mind” (79). Such an understanding can also be applied to Poe. The mid nineteenth-century saw the shift of authorship from an avocation to a professional occupation and the rise of many subsequent problems concerning literary property. Many of Poe’s works explore questions raised by the changes in authorship, specifically, the problems inherent in literary property, what an author is, and what control the author has over his work.

In “Purloined letters, Mechanical Butterflies, and Watches in Girdles,” Michael Newbury writes about the changing atmosphere of authorship in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America. He focuses largely on the shift of authorship from an avocation to a professional occupation, and the subsequent problems that arise concerning literary property. Newbury cites “The Purloined Letter” as something that “...might reveal to us something about cultural and social history, the cultural consciousness of literary property in America” (Newbury 159). Indeed, anxieties over literary property are addressed from the outset of “The Purloined Letter.” The story commences in C. Auguste Dupin’s library, and one of Poe’s earlier works “The Rue Morgue” is mentioned within the first paragraph. The mention serves as an attempt to reclaim ownership (as Poe had

lost publication rights) by reminding the reader that he authored it. The library signifies the propagation of literature and how it becomes public property. The story centers on a stolen letter and the anxiety over its ownership. The contents of the letter are never revealed – emphasizing that ownership is what it is truly valuable, not the material itself. When he writes that it is not the book or manuscript that is valuable, but the right to reproduce it, it can be argued that the letter itself is only valuable if it is not reproduced. The anxiety that the rightful owner of the letter feels is not unlike the anxiety that an author would feel about publishing his work.

In terms of bodies, to question the body is to question language one must consider what Bennett says is the deconstruction of “the proposition that body is to mind or spirit as writing is to speech” (Bennett 74). In Bennett’s analogy, body/ writing is “traditionally construed as material, external, extrinsic and contingent” whereas the spirit/speech “is construed as immaterial, internal, intrinsic and essential” (74). As I will demonstrate in Chapter II, Poe deconstructs the myth of the author, something he very much strived to be, by writing satirical tales that emphasize the conflict between author and authority. Most recently, Gero Guttzeit’s “Authorizing Monsters: Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe and Early Nineteenth-Century Figures of Gothic Authorship” argues that the othering of bodies in gothic literature represents the threat of gothic writing to the dominant romantic ideals. Guttzeit posits that “the myth of the Romantic author’s ‘solitary genius’ contrasts sharply with ‘the very popularity of Gothic novels.’ Rather than being characterized by Romantic individuality, originality and autonomy, the Gothic and its authors were characterized as generic, popular and mechanical” (Guttzeit 279). Poe was writing the body in a variety of ways for multiple audiences. As a writer by trade, one of the first

authors as author without preexisting financial wealth, he had to churn out stories that would be read by consumers of magazines. They were sensational, popular, and accessible –products of mass culture. However, he was also reflecting on what it meant to be a gendered, diseased, and isolated body and his stories can be read as critiques of prevailing social structures and institutions.

In “Edgar Allan Poe and Elias Canetti: Illuminating the Sources of Terror,” Jeffrey J. Folks uses the theory in Elias Canetti’s *Crowds and Power* to read “The Gold-Bug” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.” *Crowds and Power* is a modern treatise on how individuals psychologically relate to crowds to explain the destructive power of mass behavior. Folks points out how Canetti’s characterization of the Holocaust as an “increasingly tyrannical [form] of control” is reminiscent of the psychological horror in Poe: “the sense that the world was increasingly dominated by accidental forces beyond comprehension and, in response, the rise of increasingly authoritarian conceptions of history and social order” (Folks 2). As a result, Folks argues, fears of annihilation are central to both authors’ work (Folks 2). In “‘If you should ever want an arm’: Disability and Dependency in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Man that Was Used Up,’” Vanessa Warne analyzes how disability is represented in “The Man that Was Used Up” and how the General’s body explores anxieties surrounding disability and dependency. She also considers how “The Man that Was Used Up” can be read as Poe’s views on the relationship between literary innovation and public taste.

James Berkley’s “Post-Human Mimesis and the Debunked Machine: Reading Environmental Appropriation in Poe’s ‘Maelzel’s Chess-Player’ and ‘The Man that Was Used Up’” examines how “coupling of technological environments and subjects signifies

the “post-ness of the post-human subject” to understand the human condition in Poe’s stories (Berkley 356). John Tresch’s “‘The potent magic of verisimilitude’: Edgar Allan Poe within the mechanical age” and Alex Link’s “Laughing Androids, Weeping Zombies, and Edgar Allan Poe” also examine social conditions in relation to science and technology in the nineteenth-century.

There are many approaches in reading how Poe represents the body politic, or the way individuals relate to the broader community, in his stories. Chapter IV will further explore how Poe writes the body politic in “The Man of the Crowd” (1845) and “The Man that Was Used Up” (1839). The gothic genre has historically presented a unique discourse that exposes the dark underbelly (or under-body) of society by providing a repository for anxieties generated by it. Haunted bodies, deformed bodies, diseased bodies, and disembodied bodies expose the strangeness of all bodies and often expose the strangeness of the society they inhabit. Poe’s works reflect how lingering pre-modern fears were reoriented in the burgeoning, rational world. A Post-Structuralist reading of Poe is then especially suited to the mid-nineteenth-century American context of freedom from European social stratification. The American Romantic period celebrated solo egos, which produced a unique set of problems, when there is a lack of social affiliation, all that remains is the mind and body, and all subsequent problems that result when the world of meaning is reduced to the mind and body. The Gothic genre provides Poe a discursive space in which to engage with the threats of society metaphorically, and at times, directly.

Our attempts to think of the gothic body and reappropriate what has been considered objectified and reified ultimately lead to an expulsion of the body. As the

body cannot be totalized, the moment we attempt to speak about it, we make it foreign. The body on display is consequently made foreign, what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “the monster that cannot be swallowed” (5). When understood as a stranger, the body then inspires hatred. This understanding of the body-monstrosity hearkens back to Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of the grotesque body, providing an apt theoretical framework for exploring the gothic body in Poe’s work. In the fantastic, sensational nonsense of the Gothic that collapses the boundary between the grotesque and beautiful, Poe seeks to make sense of existence by reconciling the body and mind and demonstrating how in their intersection, they reify and deconstruct each other. The gothic body thematic in Poe’s work has a lineage in the literature of haunted bodies. Yet, uniquely, Poe’s body stories resonate with Post-structuralist issues of the body proper, the body as fetishized object, and the body politic.

The mind-body problem is clear in Poe’s writing and begs an interpretation that considers how sense, nonsense, presence, and absence reify and deconstruct notions of the body. The mind and body split has been treated as irreconcilable, but Poe’s work, through sense and touch, obliges reconciliation, with profound effects of horror and profound insight traditionally covered-up by our critical effort to see Poe as just “gothic” or psychoanalytically peculiar. In his books *Corpus* and *Corpus II*, Jean-Luc Nancy explores how we think about the body in all its contexts – the body politic, the body of letters (metaphorically and literally) and the physical bodies of human beings. Nancy has declared that it is impossible to think about them separately, as to do so would be to assume that they can exist independently, and they can only exist as they touch each other. The touching, he says, is the “limit and spacing of existence” (*Corpus* 37). Poe’s

corpus of work is full of the kind of touching Nancy describes. Poe writes decaying bodies, resurrected bodies, bodies entombed, disembodied bodies that demonstrate and ultimately transgress the boundaries between body and mind, sense and nonsense, and life and death. For example, in “A Predicament,” Signora Psyche Zenobia decapitates herself and struggles with determining what the “true” self is –her disembodied head, which is the site of sense, or her body which is the site of sensation.

It is thus useful to think of representations of the body in a variety of ways. The body-proper refers to identity, the physical body, and its sensations; the body object refers to the deconstructed or segmented body; and the body politic refers to social implications and influences. These concepts are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, often overlap and inform each other. In Edgar Allan Poe’s gothic stories, the body-proper, the body object, and the body politic function as spaces where the horror of the mind-body split becomes manifest. In this thesis, I examine how sense, identity, and body are reconciled by Poe in these constructions.

## II. The Body Proper: The Birth and Death of Psyche Zenobia

“Absence – here, that’s the body, the extent of the Psyche” – Jean-Luc Nancy

Published in 1838, Poe’s two satirical stories “How to Write a Blackwood Article” and its companion piece, “A Predicament,” tell the tale of aspiring writer Signora Psyche Zenobia, how she must physically suffer for the sake of her art to experience sensations worthy of the *belles-lettres*, and how she is literally disembodied during the writing process. Nancy tells us, “The signifying body –the whole corpus of philosophical, theological, psychoanalytic, and semiological bodies –incarnates one thing only: the absolute contradiction of not being able to be a body without being the body of a spirit, which disembodies it” (*Corpus* 69). The problem of being a body without a head—a disembodied or de-spirited body—is the very predicament that Signora Psyche Zenobia ultimately finds herself facing. What is her true body: her mind (or psyche) that thinks and interprets sensation, or her physical body, the site of sensation itself? Can they be separated? Is one more authentic than the other? In chapter II, I will explore these questions using Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” and Jean-Luc Nancy’s theories on the body and sense to better understand how Poe grappled with questions of authorial/bodily autonomy and identity. Poe’s anxieties prefigure the period that has come to be identified as modernity. His authorship has all of the birth pains that are transcended with the post-modern turn as described by Barthes.

“How to Write a Blackwood Article” borrows from *Blackwood’s Magazine*, a prestigious magazine published out of Edinburgh between 1817 and 1980. Poe uses the name “Blackwood” in his title to satirize how Blackwood authors relied on the brand’s

name to authorize their works.<sup>3</sup> The irony is that Poe himself appeals to the name Blackwood to authorize his story by its inclusion in the title. The story begins with Signora Psyche Zenobia's<sup>4</sup> introduction of herself to her readers as an individual of great importance, "I presume every body has heard of me" (173), immediately followed by a passionate defense of her name. She continues, "My name is the Signora Psyche Zenobia. This I know to be a fact. No body but my enemies ever call me Suky Snobbs" (173). Her rant about the bastardization of her name into "Suky Snobbs," and the qualification of her name Psyche as classic Greek, reveals her claim of celebrity as a sham; no real celebrity would need to belabor the point of her identity. But there is more to unpack here. Zenobia situates herself in terms of her relation to other bodies –"every body" knows her and "no body" would degrade her but her enemies.<sup>5</sup>

From the outset, she positions herself as a body dependent on and in relation to other bodies. Furthermore, her first name, Psyche, the soul or mind, and surname, Zenobia, being the embodiment of beauty, indicates the struggle to differentiate between mind and body in determining the true self. However, according to Nancy, soul and body are interconnected: "The soul is the form of a body, and therefore a body itself (psyche extended) ...the spirit is the body of sense, or sense in body. Spirit is the organ of sense, or the true body, the transfigured body" (*Corpus* 77). Zenobia's efforts to determine what is her true self will ultimately prove futile.

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<sup>3</sup> Poe's 1846 "Loss of Breath: A Tale Neither In Nor Out of 'Blackwood,'" further mocks the magazine.

<sup>4</sup> Zenobia, an allusion to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century queen of Palmyra, Septimia Zenobia, is a classic name that evokes beauty and power.

<sup>5</sup> Fact follows fiction in this case. Poe's frenemy, Rufus Griswold, wrote a slanderous obituary of Poe after his death filled with lies that would be perpetuated by future biographers for decades.

Zenobia's insistence that "any person who should look at me would be instantly aware that my name wasn't Snobbs" (Poe 174) reflects her belief that interiority can be exteriorized. She assumes (and would like her readers to believe) that her fame and essence are transparent to the world. She relates how Mr. Blackwood instantly recognizes her grandeur when they meet: "'My dear Madam,' said he, evidently struck with my majestic appearance, for I had on the crimson satin, with the green agraffas, and orange-coloured auriculas" (176). Zenobia believes that the resplendence of her outward appearance conveys her legitimacy as an author. The signified (legitimacy and celebrity) and signifier (her outward appearance) are one and the same. The idea that an object can have fully present meaning comes from the western metaphysical tradition that a sign can be naturalized. Nancy tells us that "All bodies are signs, just as all signs are (signifying) bodies" (*Corpus* 67). The tradition of reading bodies for meaning was common in the nineteenth-century. In "Poe, the Daguerreotype, and the Autobiographical Act," Kevin J. Hayes explains that "several of Poe's tales of the early 1840s [...] reflect an impulse in his day to read personality on the basis of external signs" (Hayes 479). Apparently, Poe was doing this in his earlier stories as well, as evidenced by how Zenobia seeks to embody greatness and renown through appearances. Put another way, she believes herself a book worthy of being judged by its cover.

Zenobia's anxieties about authorship are evident in her desperation to convince her readers and herself that she is an author of notoriety. Through her conference with Mr. Blackwood, she seeks to discover the formula for what constitutes the absolute author. Poe is satirizing the idea that the author is a social construction, revealing that the author as a final signified is a myth. Since Zenobia's authorship relies on a formula,

meaning is deferred to that which authorizes it, in this case, Blackwood's name. To further authenticate her writing, Mr. Blackwood instructs Zenobia to reference other texts, specifically the French, Greek, German and Latin classics:

And yet above all things it is necessary that your article have an air of erudition, or at least afford evidence of extensive general reading [...] By casting your eye down almost any page of any book in the world, you will be able to perceive at once a host of little scraps of either learning or *bel-esprit-ism*, which are the very thing for the spicing of a Blackwood article.  
(Poe 179)

Mr. Blackwood proceeds to provide Zenobia with a whole list of possible allusions she might make in her writing, from the "Ionic and Eleatic schools – of Archytas, Gorgias and Alcmeon" to the "Persian Iris" to quotes from Locke<sup>6</sup> and Schiller (179). Beyond the air of sophistication that dropping names may lend to a writer, it is worth noting how these references relate to nature, being, and sense. The classical references are not only another mode of deferring a proper name but a nod to the philosophers who also had conflicting views on what constituted the self and the origin of sense. Zenobia, too, will have difficulty reconciling her conflicting sensations and beliefs about her own body and sense of identity in "A Predicament."

While Poe is deriding the concept that a piece of literature's merit relies rather heavily on its predecessors' authentication of it, Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author"

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<sup>6</sup> Locke's view of the human mind as a *tabula rasa*, a "white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas," renders the individual dependent on her senses to facilitate her relationship to the world and ideas.

goes beyond Zenobia's implications and argues that no such thing as originality exists in a literary work. Terry Eagleton explains the reasoning behind Barthes' argument:

All literary texts are woven out of other literary texts, not in the conventional sense that they bare the traces of "influence" but in the more radical sense that every other word, phrase or segment is a reworking of other writings which precede or surround the individual work. There is no such thing as literary "originality," no such thing as the "first" literary work: all literature is 'intertextual.'" (Eagleton 119)

If there is no such thing as originality in a text, the idea of author as origin is negated. In fact, Barthes would argue there is no such thing as origin. Consequently, there is no such thing as author. At the other end of history, the nonexistence of the author is a point of anxiety for Poe. William Etter contends that "Poe strove to construct prose works of finer taste and sophistication than those he believed he encountered in popular culture by exposing the crudeness and absurdity of the literary bodies consumed by American readers" (5). Whether out of distaste for popular literature or fear of his own ambiguity, Poe was exceedingly concerned with his own authority and authorship and how his work was consumed by audiences. He, like Zenobia, is a body dependent on others; their body of work depends on readers. The authorial or proper name for the self extends beyond the world of literary publishing. Publishing is just an exacerbation of what it means to have a public identity.

For Poe, authorial innovation is of utmost importance in indicating possession of a text in lieu of literary property, and he openly mocks the lack of originality of other writers. Mr. Blackwood tells Zenobia about an article recently published in his magazine:

“That was a nice bit of flummery, and went down the throats of the people delightfully. They would have it that Coleridge wrote the paper – but not so. It was composed by my pet baboon, Juniper, over a rummer or Hollands and water” (Poe 176). He indicates that even the most celebrated of authors are lacking in talent and ingenuity and that readers cannot tell the difference between the writings of Coleridge and an ape, underscoring the myth of authorial individuality.

According to Mr. Blackwood, the inability to decipher is central to good writing. Poe comically gives credit to bad penmanship as a mark of respectable literature: “I assume it upon myself to say, that no individual, of however great genius, ever wrote with a good pen—understand me, —a good article. You may take it for granted, that when manuscript can be read, it is never worth reading” (Poe 176). While Mr. Blackwood refers to the physical appearance of the writing, the significance of his remark extends to the indecipherability of the text. As aforementioned, the more ostentatious and obscure the references used in an article, the more highly regarded the piece of literature will be. While Barthes does not concern himself with the pomposity of references used within a text, he does champion the philosophy that writing is by nature indecipherable:

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, “run” (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. (Barthes 3)

Ultimately, a text is impenetrable because there are no hypostases<sup>7</sup> at its foundation, no final signified to provide it with absolute meaning. To write an article worthy of publication in Blackwood's, the text must be free of any originality; it can possess no hypostases of its own and must defer meaning and value to external, cultural references. Likewise, attempts to think of the body-proper and reappropriate what has been considered objectified ultimately leads to an expulsion of the body.

What becomes evident is that there is no room for individuality within Blackwood's name, a problem that can be understood as a clear-cut case of the problem between sign and referent. Blackwood's operates as the sign, the brand onto which the author latches. The story exposes the inextricability of individuality (author) and brand name (authority). The sign is so severed by mucky referents that there results a kind of decapitation of the author, both in a figurative sense and a literal one with the beheading of Zenobia by the minute hand of the clock. Poe makes the case that there is no such thing as making a name for one's self and raises questions of whether there is any separation between author and brand, or self and body. Zenobia is most obstreperous in foregrounding the identity of Signora Psyche Zenobia (versus that of Suky Snobbs) that the reader has no idea what her real self is – she is a giant mess of symbols. As a result of the indeterminate separation between author and brand, her identity perishes.

The loss of identity occurs prior to any publishing or branding; the death of the author occurs at the moment of writing. The text eclipses the author and survives only so long as the ideas and voice continue in a dialogue with subsequent texts. Barthes

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<sup>7</sup> From Ancient Greek, *hypostasis* is a term Barthes uses to represent the underlying state of an Author, that is, the society, history, the psyche, freedom beneath the Author's work.

explains: “As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (1). Although Barthes’ framing is lazy (as that which never existed cannot be destroyed) the point he makes is that a text cannot be bogged down by fixed meaning(s) or traced to an origin because it continually disseminates meaning through difference.

A useful way of thinking of writing about the body, like the problem of Barthes’ author, is that it cannot be totalized. Nancy asks how writers can write or touch the body and concludes that any attempt “ends up, directly or indirectly, signifying the body as absence or presence” (*Corpus* 11). Poe’s Zenobia manages to do both. In “How to Write a Blackwood Article,” Mr. Blackwood tells Zenobia: “Sensations are the great things after all. Should you ever be drowned or hung, be sure and make a note of your sensations—they will be worth to you ten guineas a sheet. If you wish to write forcible, Miss Zenobia, pay minute attention to the sensations” (Poe 177). She takes his suggestions to heart.

In “A Predicament,” she finds a way to experience the sensations she needs to physically endure so that she can effectively convey to her readers what death feels like. Zenobia wanders around Edinburgh and comes across a gothic cathedral. After climbing the tower, she sticks her head through the aperture of the dial-plate of the clock to get a better view of the city. She declines to recount the sights because, according to her, everybody knows what Edinburgh looks like. She instead focuses on the physical sensations: “... as I was deeply absorbed in the heavenly scenery beneath me, I was

startled by something very cold which pressed with a gentle pressure upon the back of my neck” (187). Eventually, she figures out it is the minute hand of the giant clock, but it is too late for her to extricate herself from this predicament. Zenobia then narrates how her eyes fall out: “While I was thinking how I should possibly manage without them, one actually tumbled out of my head” (188). The power of author as visionary or seer is challenged here. The loss of her eyes can be interpreted as the loss of authority or authorial identity, all in the service of getting published. After her head is severed, she remarks, “I was not sorry to see the head which had occasioned me so much embarrassment at length make a final separation from my body” (189). That she is still able to think after her decapitation perhaps betrays Poe’s belief that even when the author is subsumed in publication, he never really dies.

Nevertheless, “A Predicament” lends itself as a perfect example of the death of the author in the process of writing. Psyche Zenobia’s body and sense are simultaneously present and absent. She sets out to put herself in a situation where she will experience extreme suffering and horror in order to infuse her writing with true reflections on sensation. Zenobia then attempts to recreate the bifurcation of her identity. To be a good writer, she must physically suffer and be willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of her art. To be a published writer, she must also be willing to sacrifice her individuality in exchange for the authorization by a brand name. Zenobia’s (and Poe’s) main goal is to establish herself as an author, to make a name for herself, or in Barthesian terms, to identify herself as the origin of her body of work. That which Poe struggled to establish, Barthes delivers the epitaph for:

Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favor of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (Barthes 4)

The birth and the death of the author have taken place in the span of time between Poe and Barthes. Poe's Zenobia prefigures the birth of authorship, as well as the Barthesian mythology of origin. Once Zenobia is decapitated, she is still unable to distinguish the real identity: "With my head I imagined, at once, that I the head, was the real Signora Psyche Zenobia – at another I felt convinced that myself, the body, was the proper identity" (Poe 189). The physical disembodiment betrays the anxiety of losing identity or the anxiety of not being able to discern what the true identity is, a dilemma that highlights the problem of the mind-body split.

The body-mind problem has led philosophers, critics, and writers to wrestle with how we think about the body and to question whether mind and body are indeed inextricable. A consensus is that bodies need other bodies with which to differentiate from and relate to. As such, the existence of an individual is determined in relation to the other; it is a relationship that is inherently ethical. One can contemplate a singularity, but if there is no single point, existence can only be determined by relationship. At the fundamental claim of existence is an ethical praxis. Ethics is the nondeconstructible condition that allows for the possibilities of deconstruction at all, and such an inoculation

against enclosure indicates a radically prior ethics. Deconstruction is an activity or way of reading to free the text by preventing enclosure; it is therefore ethics. Ethics, in a Nancyian context, posits that an individual cannot not be accountable for the Other. Each individual is always already responsible for the Other because he cannot exist without the Other. Being is therefore necessarily shared by an Other. We are mutually embroiled, mutually constitutive beings responsible for and answerable to all Others.

In these two stories, Poe demonstrates that, when taken into consideration separately, sense and body lose all meaning. The true self is neither one nor the other, but the coexistence of both. Psychic sense, then, depends on physical sense. What is revealed by the proper body's suffering is the existence of the psyche. Walter Shear argues, "For all its extravagant moments, the essential drama of Edgar Allan Poe's fiction is that of the individual mind, orchestrated and ordered by the life of the senses" (Shear 276). Nowhere is this more true than the moment when Zenobia decapitates herself. She goes back and forth trying to determine what the proper identity is— the head that has psychic sense or the body that has physical sense.

Ultimately, she is unable to determine what the true identity is, revealing that physical sensation and psychic sense are inextricably bound up with each other. Nancy tells us that the body is both present and absent and time is the spacing between life and death: "Absence-here, that's the body, the extent of psyche. No place before birth or after death. No before/after: time is spacing. Time is the rising up and absenting, the coming-and-going into presence" (*Corpus* 119). Nancy's premise that existence is nothing but sense renders the body's physical existence as something that cannot be certain. In reexamining the Cartesian psychophysical parallel of mind/body dualism, he proposes,

paradoxically, that since the essence of corporeal existence is “to be without any essence,” then ontology of the body is the same as ontology itself (15). All that we can know is what the body gives us to know. The “sense” is the challenge of our existence, as the question of sense is what informs our understanding of the world in which we live. For Signora Psyche Zenobia, to be decapitated by a minute hand, “the scythe of time,”<sup>8</sup> leads to suspension between life and death, presence and absence, sense and nonsense and is the ultimate achievement in writing. In this simultaneously dead/alive state, she finally can find the poetic language to represent the sensations of body.

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<sup>8</sup> An alternative title for “A Predicament.”

### III. The Body Object: Ligeia, Madeline, and Berenice

“I am the opening, the tomb, or the mouth” –Jean-Luc Nancy

In “Ligeia” (1838), “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), and “Berenice” (1835), Poe explores the construction of gender (among other things) by portraying the female body as fetishized objects that the male characters seek –but ultimately fail—to control and possess. In “Ligeia” and “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the body is literally ob-jected when the spirits of the deceased detach from the proper, or physical, body. Madeline Usher is dispossessed of her body and then possesses her brother, Roderick. Similarly, in “Ligeia,” the eponymous character possesses her surviving husband and his new wife Rowena –beyond her death. Both these women are consumed by the men around them and consume them in return. In “Berenice,” the narrator Egæus is possessed by his cousin insofar that he obsesses over her to the point of insanity –he loses his senses and his sense of self. Patriarchy depends upon the control of female sexuality. In these stories, however, Poe interrogates how society is inscribed in bodies. In chapter III, I examine how rigid nineteenth-century gender constructions are embodied, transgressed, inverted, and sublimated in these stories.

In “Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves,” Joan Dayan argues that Poe’s treatment of women, exemplars of what he termed “supernal Beauty,” is “an entitlement that he would degrade again and again” (Dayan 180). She argues that Madeline Usher’s return from the grave as a grotesque double of her twin brother Roderick subverts the women’s status as an ideal “thus undermining his own ‘Philosophy of Composition’: the ‘death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world’” (Dayan 180). The subversion of woman’s status, Dayan says, elevates the woman’s

status: “No longer pure or passive, she returns as an earthy—and very unpoetical—subject” (180). While I agree that this refusal to die or be subverted indicates a change in Madeline’s status, I disagree that it is un-poetic. Re-presentation in spectral or ghostly form *is* poetic, and in an ethical sense, a responsible way of bearing witness to her being. Likewise, in a Nancy-ian reading of “Ligeia,” I think her husband’s responsibility to carry her memory (and, as we learn, her very extra-corporeal existence) is also poetic. Nancy allows us to translate Poe’s otherwise offensive morbidity or equally offensive idealization into a finer appreciation of his metaphysics of the body.

The women in these stories are alike not only in the fact that they succumb to unknown illnesses that ravage their bodies but also by how they transcend the corporeal in both life and death. Stephanou argues that Ligeia exemplifies the tension between idealism and materiality: “Ligeia not only diverts from medical discourse’s idealization of woman’s materiality but focuses on the very horror of her materiality elevating her from a position of docile benevolence to that of dominant and vigorous malevolence” (38). I endeavor to explore how the fetishization of the body in these stories exposes the gap between sense and body. While they are women entombed (in their female bodies, by the male gaze, and in actual tombs) they also exist as spiritual beings without body, but nevertheless, with the agency that they were denied while in their living bodies.

It could be argued that the body proper is always objectified insofar that the body is always exscribed. The body proper will always be stranger, and the only way to “save it” (from carrying grotesque meaning) would depend on it existing, which is problematic as Nancy tells us because “then everything would have to float, hanging in mid-air, and bodies must touch the ground” (*Corpus* 9). The women in Poe’s stories dispossess their

bodies, which is nonsense inasmuch as they become ghosts or specters. They are also rendered without physical sense, devoid of a physical body, and thus devoid of the possibility of physical sensation.

In death, there is the mortal spacing of the body, which registers the fact that existence has no sense but existence. While the men in these stories seek to possess the women's physical bodies, the women refuse to be possessed. In being ghosts, spirits, or spectral beings, they are both simultaneously present and absent, which collapses the binary between them and opens a space for existence without sense. They exist beyond their body proper, where the physical senses – sight, smell, touch, taste – are confined. As such, a useful way to read how Poe constructs and deconstructs the body in these stories is with consideration to the concepts of finitude, community, strangeness, the trace, and bearing witness.

In “Ligeia,” the narrator in Poe’s story is cognizant of the fate of his beloved Ligeia from the outset of the story. He says: “I saw that she must die –and I struggled desperately in spirit with the grim Azrael” (Poe 164). Once she passes, he does not seek to give meaning to her death; rather, he bears witness to her and strives to do her memory justice by remembering her in the poetic expression of the traces of her existence. In *Inoperative Community*, Nancy explains the necessity of community in bearing witness and the responsibility placed on any individual being: “If it sees its fellow-being die, a living being can subsist only outside itself [...] each one of us is then driven out of the confines of his persona and loses himself as much as possible in the community of his fellow creatures” (IC 15). This sentiment is pervasive throughout “Ligeia.” After she passes, the narrator seeks solace in his new bride, Rowena, but finds little as he is

overwhelmed by his longing for his former wife. He senses traces of her everywhere. He concedes that in the first month of their marriage, Rowena's company offers more "pleasure than otherwise" though he "loathe[s] her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to men" (Poe 169). This hatred is explained in the following line when his "memory flew back, (oh, with what intensity of regret!) to Ligeia" (169). Rather than lose himself in the comfort of his new bride, he loses himself in his memories of Ligeia.

Trace is the process of difference insofar as it serves as a metaphor for presence and absence. Since presentation and withdrawal of signification happens simultaneously, it is an event that refuses to be grounded. Remembering the deceased is, in and of itself, a process of positing and withdrawing. The dead are no longer physically present, yet their memory persists. In "The Free Voice of Man," Nancy writes:

That which can efface itself, or better, that which essentially effaces itself (effaces itself from itself and effaces its self) has the property of the trace in general. But this is a property which is not one, it does not constitute an essence. Therefore, one ought not to say that the trace essentially effaces itself, but that I must efface myself. And that man must efface himself. (50)

That man must and will die means that his death will produce a trace; however, this trace is not to be understood as proof of his essence. It can be said that to responsibly bear witness to someone's death, the trace of their life needs to be addressed.

The abstractions of theory I'm thus far applying to Poe will seem, indeed, abstract. However, Poe himself uses a kindred vocabulary of his own that mediates between the spiritual-language of his time and an understanding of Nancy-ian metaphysics. The word "trace" appears numerous times in addition to variations such as shadow and shade.

“Strange” and “secret” are two other words that appear frequently. The bulk of the narrative centers on the narrator’s efforts to describe Ligeia, but he is ever aware of how elusive and insufficient language is: “Ah, word of no meaning! behind whose vast latitude of mere sound we intrench our ignorance of so much of the spiritual” (Poe 162). He is keenly aware of how he will never be able to fully encapsulate her essence in regular discourse. He frequently describes her features, especially her eyes, as strange: “I have tried in vain to detect the irregularity and to trace home my own perception of ‘the strange’” (160). The narrator carries Ligeia within him, and the strangeness he feels could be that same *unheimlich* sense that Nancy defines as the awareness that she would die. He tries tirelessly to recall facts about her life, but laments, “I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia” (159). The details seem to be right within reach, yet he cannot ever quite possess them. He is, however, in her absence possessed by the presence of her and the traces of her existence.

The responsibility that the narrator must carry Ligeia post-mortem is not only figurative but literally demonstrated in her possession of him. In her final moments as she lies on her death bed, she has him recite a poem that she wrote. There is imagery of mimes and puppets that serves as a metaphor for how Ligeia will ultimately possess the body of the narrator’s next wife, Rowena:

Mimes, in the form of God on high,  
Mutter and mumble low,  
And hither and thither fly—  
Mere puppets they, who come and go

At bidding of vast formless things  
That shift the scenery to and fro,  
Flapping from out their Condor wings  
Invisible Wo! [...]  
But see, amid the mimic rout,  
A crawling shape intrude!  
A blood-red thing that writhes from out  
The scenic solitude!  
It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs  
The mimes become its food,  
And the seraphs sob at vermin fangs  
In human gore imbued.

Out—out are the lights—out all!  
And over each quivering form,  
The curtain, a funeral pall,  
Comes down with the rush of a storm,  
And the angels, all pallid and wan,  
Uprising, unveiling, affirm  
That the play is the tragedy, “Man,”  
And its hero the Conqueror Worm. (172)

The poem, if read as a metaphor for what happens later in the story, can be seen as a kind of spell. In reciting Ligeia's poem, the narrator is grasped by her and grasps her in such a way that death does not separate them. As the narrator remarks, there is a quality about the melody of her voice that is seemingly immortal: "My brain reeled as I hearkened entranced, to a melody more than mortal –to assumptions and aspirations which mortality had never before known" (164). Her musical voice, her poetry, her very being, are all transcendent of death –she lives on in her husband who carries her within him.

The burden to carry her memory can be understood in terms of the Nancy-ian imperative to bear witness to the life and death of others. The imperative emerges from discourse itself, which makes-up the imperative or is made-up by humans and pretends to be essential ("Free Voice of Man" 51). The other acknowledges and thematizes its embeddedness in language and discourse, which calls for it to deconstruct itself. As such, imperative thus becomes unjustifiable and unprovable, insofar as it produces the paradox of proving something that is not provable, or in other words, proving that proving is impossible. The discursive imperative is relevant not only to language but to being itself. The imperative of the voice of man is the question of finitude. It is the acknowledgment that we are all going to die because we are mortally fragmented and finite beings. By reading Ligeia's poetry at the moment of her death, her husband bears witness to her existence and is tasked with the imperative to carry her within him. Ligeia is embedded in her language, her poem, that works as an invocation through which she will reappear or re-present in Rowena's corpse.

Poetic language is the only responsible form of witnessing since it is non-representational. Re-presentation cannot ever happen because no thing is ever fully

present. Therefore, any kind of responsible rendering must be poetic. In other words, poetry does not seek to re-present reality or make any truth claims. It engages metaphorical language to approximate experience but is cognizant that it can never encapsulate it or totalize it. It does not make any claim of what happened exactly; instead, it defers meaning by saying that it was like something else. Meaning (as telling and saying) is the irreducible in some sense and therefore nondeconstructible. Being as be-ing (in difference) as a continual verb does not posit or pose signification to be deconstructed. Ostensibly it is precisely that which makes signification possible in the first place. In the supernatural imagination of Poe, this functions as a haunting of the narrator throughout the story.

In Derrida's discussion of his late friend Gadamer in *Sovereignities in Question*, the philosopher is moved and affected by the event of his friend's death. His writing is almost romantic in the sense that he carries Gadamer within him. He demonstrates how it is possible to use language, when it is not a calculation or claim to truth, as an expression by bearing witness rather than giving testimony. Perhaps one of the more superficial understandings of Derrida is that deconstruction is a merciless drive toward entropy in a linguistic attack that will not be satisfied until there are no two words left that have not been dismantled and stripped of meaning. But we see that a slightly deeper understanding of deconstruction allows for and enables language to thrive when it ruptures all the political and psychological entanglements of connotation and artificiality. Derrida's memorial to his departed friend exposes something very human: the ethical nature of communion that stems from the realization of finitude. Similarly, Edgar Allan Poe's

“Ligeia” exposes the same ethic when the narrator bears witness to his beloved wife Ligeia’s death.

At the end of the tale, his second wife Rowena dies, and the narrator sits alone with the corpse, tortured not by her passing, but by his longing for Ligeia. As he ponders her, he experiences a rupture in which he is rendered speechless and senseless: “Through a species of unutterable horror and awe, for which the language of mortality has no sufficiently energetic expression, I felt my heart cease to beat, my limbs grow rigid where I sat” (Poe 171). His speechlessness and senselessness can be understood through the philosophy that one cannot give testimony to something he has witnessed; he can only ever bear witness. Once he regains his senses, he plunges again into visions of Ligeia, but is continually interrupted by the unspeakable horrors that he can only qualify as such: “Why shall I pause to relate how, time after time, until near the period of the gray dawn, this hideous drama of revivification was repeated; how each terrific relapse was only into a sterner and apparently more irredeemable death” (172). The stirring of the corpse indicates an interruption in the interruption that is death. The body repeats this process of revivification until it opens its eyes. The last line of the tale reads: “Here then, at least, I shrieked aloud, ‘can I never –can I never be mistaken –these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes –of my lost love –of the lady –of the Lady Ligeia’” (173). Whether the narrator’s account really happened and Ligeia was embodied and living or whether this was merely a fanciful delusion is unclear.

What is clear is that Ligeia remained present despite her death in a clear demonstration that finitude does not signify an end for the responsibility of the other to carry the deceased. Poe writes: “Man doth not yield him [the dead] to the angels, nor unto

death utterly” (166). In examining this story through a Nancy-ian lens, the barrier between life and death might be read as the dangerous fault line that Nancy alludes to in *Being Singular Plural*: “The horizon of the infinite is no longer a line that is drawn or a line that will be drawn, which orients or gathers the meaning of a course of progress or navigation. It is the opening or distancing of horizon itself, and in the opening: *us*. We happen as the opening itself, the dangerous fault line of a rupture” (*BSP* xii). Nancy explains that in interrogating how one might gain access to origin, we must consider how the outside is inside, or in other words, how it is the spacing of the dis-position of the world and our co-appearance with others. We are the opening or space and Being is necessarily open and moving toward the Other.

The presence and absence dynamic of the death of one woman and the revivification of the other produce a rupture that the narrator can only bear witness to, and in recounting the story for his audience, he must clarify that the experience itself is extradiscursive. Deconstruction lends itself to an empirical truth testing. It has had an effect on philosophy and literature by removing hidden assumptions of the way we use language. Therefore, any attempt to speak about bearing witness or rupture must either engage poetic language or acknowledge that it cannot speak of any proper body. For Poe’s narrator, his duty to carry Ligeia surpasses his marriage vows, and his responsibility to her most certainly did not end when death did them part. The imperative is perhaps best understood through the Derridean argument “Before I am, I carry the other.” Derrida wrote: “As soon as I am obliged, from the instant when I am obliged to you, when I owe, when I owe it to you, owe it to myself to carry you, as soon as I speak to you and am responsible for you, or before you, there can no longer, essentially, be any

world. No world can any longer support us, serve as mediation, as ground, as earth, as foundation or as alibi” (“Rams” 158). For Derrida, death begs the question of responsibility to the *tout autre*, the wholly other. Questions of reality, of materiality, cease in this relationship. In “Ligeia,” her death is not the end of the relationship to her husband in a Derridean sense, nor is it the end of her existence. When an individual being dies, this is not the same thing as merely disappearing. Death is to be understood as an individual being’s ownmost possibility, that is also to say that death is an individual being’s utmost possibility for existence. Thus, death reveals existence as the apogee of existence.

Nancy would say that the death of the Other happens not for it in its own subjectivity: “death presents the interruption of a saying of the whole and a totality of saying: it presents the fact that the saying-of-everything is at each time an ‘everything is said,’ a discrete intransitory completeness. This is why death does not take place ‘for the subject,’ but only for its representation” (*Being Singular Plural* 88). In Poe’s gothic tale, Ligeia as a subject does not die, but neither does her representation. She re-presents in Rowena when her spirit embodies Rowena.

In “The Fall of the House of Usher” we see a similar treatment of recitation/incantation, possession, and rupture. Madeline Usher dies, revives, and kills her twin brother, Roderick. Multiple ruptures occur—from the transgression of the boundaries of death, to implied incest, to the actual fissuring of the house at the end of the tale. Protean by nature, transgression, like the body, is irreducible to a single definition. However elusive a concept it may be, it has not dissuaded writers and scholars from theorizing about how transgression functions. The one thing that most can agree on is that

it involves the crossing or pushing of boundaries. But since every society is different and because individual societies change over time, the laws and norms that dictate the boundaries (that are liable to be pushed or crossed) are not fixed. As such, notions of transgression shift as often as the norms that demarcate the boundaries that govern us do. The framework for reading texts as transgressive can involve the treatment of any number of different themes. Gothic literature is ideal for an analysis of the transgressive because horror often deals with many transgressive themes and involves a crossing of boundaries in one way or another. Using a framework that applies Nancy's theories of the body, Georges Bataille's theory of continuity and discontinuity, Julia Kristeva's discussion of the abject, and Michel Foucault's discussion on sexuality in regard to "The Fall of the House of Usher" produces a reading that illuminates Poe's treatment of sexuality as that which sets the boundaries of finitude and being.

The house of Usher is inhabited by the last two members of the family lineage, twins Roderick and Madeline. The story is relayed by an unnamed narrator, a childhood friend of Roderick's who goes to visit his friend at his behest. What the narrator discovers is a severely disturbed Roderick who suffers from mental agitation which produces "a cadaverousness of complexion: [his] lips somewhat thin and very pallid..." (Poe 202), and an ailing Madeline who dies the day after his arrival. As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that what afflicts Roderick is his sexual anxiety surrounding his sister:

I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of

descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation,  
so lain. (200)

With the death of Madeline, so ends the future of the Usher family. Death and sex are therefore inextricably linked in Poe's tale, though, paradoxically, it is incest that has allowed for the proliferation of the Usher line at all.

In "A Preface to Transgression," Michel Foucault argues that sexuality and death are at the root of transgression. He traces the discourse of transgression back to Sade who employs, what he terms, a discourse of profanation. He asks, "Profanation in a world that no longer recognizes the sacred – is this not more or less what we may call transgression?" (Foucault 30). To understand what Foucault means, it is necessary to look at how Sade virtually crossed every conceivable boundary by writing unrepentant, debased, sexual acts. In *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, brother, Le Chevalier de Mirval, and sister, Madame de Saint-Ange, engage in perverse and gratuitous sex acts with each other and others. The orgy master, Dolmancé, admits to sodomizing a seven-year-old boy. Eugenie, the protégé, participates in the beating and rape of her own mother. Sade goes into explicit detail for pages on end of lewd sex acts unapologetically. Sexuality since Sade is still a taboo topic and subject to policing, but its role in our culture has changed. Foucault suggests: "Perhaps the importance of sexuality in our culture, the fact that since Sade it has persistently been linked to the most profound decisions of our language, derives from nothing else than this correspondence which connects it to the death of God" (31). What Foucault is suggesting is that the language of sexuality is directly related to Nietzsche's proclamation of God's death.

According to Foucault, pre-sex discourse uses a veil for the infinite, whereas the language of sexuality speaks to being and finitude. Foucault explains that: “By denying us the limit of the Limitless, the death of God leads to an experience in which nothing may again announce the exteriority of being, and consequently to an experience which is interior and sovereign” (32). For him, sexuality is the limit to consciousness and the limit of the law because it is the “sole substance” of every universal taboo. The death of God presents us to a world exposed by the experience of its limits that are fashioned and unfashioned by that excess which transgresses it. Transgression, then, brings to light the relationship of being to finitude.

My previous paragraph, with a certain echo-chamber among the main theorists of our time, stretches credulity, so let us now turn to Poe's tale itself, for his rendering of theory via his characteristic gothic obsessions. The proverbial veil is lifted in Poe's story from the outset, letting the readers know that the story is going to deal with a discourse more akin to Nietzsche's. As the narrator approaches the house, he is overcome by an eerie feeling as he considers it: “with an utter depression of the soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveler upon opium – the bitter lapse into every day life – the hideous dropping off the veil” (Poe 199). A Foucauldian reading of this scene suggests that what will follow is a language that speaks to the tie between being and finitude. Indeed, it is a story about sexuality that speaks both being and death.

For Roderick Usher, sexuality represents death and being in the Foucauldian application quite literally. Sexuality is that which promotes the continuation of the Usher line through incest, and ultimately what ends it. A striking similarity between Poe's work

and Foucault's theoretical exposition is the use of the concept of sexuality as a fissure to understand the limits of being.

Thus, it is not through sexuality that we communicate with the orderly and pleasingly profane world of animals; rather, sexuality is a fissure – not one which surrounds us as the basis of our isolation or individuality, but one which marks the limits within us and designates us as a limit. (Foucault 30)

Sexuality is precisely the acknowledgment of the death of God because it affirms our inability to extend beyond ourselves. It is that which sets the limits to our being and defines our being as a limit. Sexuality is the fissure between being and death. The Usher mansion and its eventual schism itself represents just such a fissure.

Symbolic for the Usher family and Roderick specifically as he is the only surviving member, the house itself assumes a lifelike quality. As the narrator makes his way up to it at the start of the story, he likens the windows to eyes and describes it as having a depressed mood hanging about it and notes a decayed countenance that he owes to the incestuous deficiency of the family line.

It was this deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character or the premises with the accredited character of the people, and while speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other – it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the

original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the “House of Usher”— an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion.

(Poe 201)

The dilapidated, crumbling condition of the mansion speaks to the erosion of the family that resides therein. The eeriness and grotesqueness of it are perhaps the result of years of incest. The house comes to embody the condition of the family line and when it falls in the end, it is not just a physical collapse of the material house, but a collapse of the family. The title then assumes a double entendre of meaning.

The collapse of house and family Usher is foreshadowed in the beginning as the narrator continues to contemplate the mansion: “Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn” (202). The fissure of the house is the boundary that marks the limits of the Usher line and specifies it as its own limit. In other words, the limit of the possibility of the Usher line is itself inasmuch that it can only continue if Madeline and Roderick produce offspring. The house of Usher is haunted by the perversity of the family, although it may be that it is only in poor condition because of the threat that there will be no child produced to ensure its future. We are presented with no account of the house’s condition prior to the narrator’s arrival. It is fair to assume that it is dying because the line is dying, but it could also be the result of the “deficiencies” of the tenants and that it owes its illness to theirs. Roderick and Madeline both suffer

physical as well as mental deficiencies, so it could be that the house is an embodiment or incorporation of their illnesses.

Foucault cites sexuality as that which carries us to the limits of our being, as “the limit of consciousness, because it ultimately dictates the only possible reading of our unconscious; the limit of the law, since it seems the sole substance of universal taboos” (30). Since the house represents both sexuality and death, it demarcates the limits of Usher’s consciousness. The narrator reads a poem aloud to Roderick entitled “The Haunted Palace” in which the house employs the iconographic medieval tradition of “The Mouth of Hell” in which the entrance to hell is set in a building with a structure that appears face-like. The first stanza of the poem runs thus:

In the greenest of our valleys,  
By good angels tenanted,  
Once a fair and stately palace ---  
Radiant palace---reared its head. (Poe 207)

The poem also recalls the opening description of the house which connects house and owner. Upon reading it and noting Usher’s reaction, the narrator remarks: “I perceived for the first time, a full consciousness on the part of Usher, of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne” (207). Perhaps the consciousness that he sees *is* Usher’s awareness of the state of his own being. With Madeline dead (or so we think) it is in this moment that he realizes the limits of his own being and finitude as being set by the boundaries of reason, specifically, the laws and norms that condemn incest. In addition to setting boundaries to being and finitude, the house also sets physical limits. That Roderick is unable to leave the house is not a detail to be overlooked:

He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth—in regard to an influence which had some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit – an effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the morale of his existence.

(204)

His inability to get outside is not to be read as simply his lack of desire, but a metaphor for his inability to exteriorize being. He literally *cannot* exist outside of the house because *it* marks the limitations of his being. As mentioned earlier, the “dropping off the veil” indicates that this is a world where God is dead and there can be nothing external to the self.

More than just setting the limits to Roderick’s being, the house is also organized hierarchically to enforce gender boundaries. Roderick has free roam of the upper portions of the house whereas Madeline is confined to the lower spaces. The spatial arrangement suggests that as a man, he is ranked superior to his inferior twin. Madeline, it would seem, refuses to stay in her place and continually transgresses the boundaries that Roderick and the house set for her. It is also worth noting how the house itself is not only represented as a body, but it is organized in terms of the social body—or gender roles.

Shortly after the narrator’s arrival at the house, Roderick is in the middle of explaining how ill and incapacitated she is when the narrator espies her floating down the hall. He reports that there are an unawareness and aloofness about her. We are led to

question how ill she really is if she is able to move around. Her refusal to stay confined to her room demonstrates her refusal to be suppressed. Usher decides to have her buried in a copper-lined vault below the house which: “had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a donjon-keep” (211). This detail is significant in understanding how trapped Madeline is. Her confinement is similar but different to Roderick’s “enchainment.” He is tied to the house inasmuch that it is his duty to carry on the Usher name.

Madeline is a prisoner in the more traditional sense, and Roderick acts as her captor. Following her death, Usher tells the narrator that he wants to bury her privately and with haste as to prevent body snatchers from stealing her body: “The brother had been led to his resolution (so he told me) by consideration of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased of certain obtrusive and eager inquiries on the part of her medical men, and of the remote and exposed situation of the burial-ground of the family” (210). Roderick qualifies his decisions with the fear that Madeline’s rare disease<sup>9</sup> will make her desirable to medical students and physicians who might try to steal her body, but his anxieties are perhaps a bit more deep-seated. While Madeline was still alive, Roderick tried to keep her as isolated as possible and tried to prevent doctors from coming into the house to attend to her. One reading of his apprehension is that the intrusion of another man threatens to break the family line. He fears that another will possess her body; it is a fear so powerful that it persists beyond her death.

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<sup>9</sup> It is suggested that she has some sort of cataleptic condition that is similar to schizophrenia. Her condition, as well as Roderick’s mental state and physical sensitivity to light may be the result of inbreeding.

We never do learn whether Roderick and Madeline ever attempted to have children or whether the two ever even had a sexual encounter, but it is clear that Roderick's strong aversion to the threat of an outsider taking his sister is enough to move him to murder her.<sup>10</sup> The narrator belabors the point that both Roderick and Madeline suffer deficiencies that are the consequences of incest, so it is a possibility that the inbreeding was so far advanced that the two were rendered incapable of having a successful coupling. Another reading of Madeline's so-called disease is her sexual maturity. Before burying her, the narrator and Roderick open the coffin:

Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead ---for we could not regard her unawed. The disease which had thus entombed the lady in her maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon which is so terrible in death. (Poe 211)

The picture of health and youth, she has a blush on her chest and face. Traditionally, the blush is indicative of arousal and sexual maturation. Her physical sexuality is obvious even in death, and this may have been a great point of anxiety for Roderick. The narrator makes several allusions to Roderick's inadequacies which may be construed as a kind of impotence. Physical capacity aside, it is apparent that Roderick is unable to keep her suppressed and hidden away from other men. His lack of control over is commensurate with his inability to possess her.

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<sup>10</sup> Near the end of the story, Roderick confesses that he buried her alive.

In *Death and Sensuality: A study of Eroticism and the Taboo*, Georges Bataille explains the rationale behind the 'If I can't have you, no one will' mentality. Bataille contends that all three types of eroticism are precipitated by desire; desire, when it is unfulfilled, becomes suffering. Bataille argues that unrequited desire for a lover can turn murderous:

The likelihood of suffering is all the greater since suffering alone reveals the total significance of the beloved object. Possession of the beloved object does not only imply death, but the idea of death is linked with the urge to possess. If the lover cannot possess the beloved, he will sometimes think of killing her, often he would rather kill her than lose her [...] Behind these frenzied notions is the glimpse of a continuity possible through the beloved. (Bataille 20)

Roderick's inability to possess Madeline prompts him to murder her. Indeed, he would rather kill her than face the possibility that another man (such as her visiting doctor) might take what belongs to him. All three forms of eroticism that Bataille identifies are at play in this text as is the discourse of continuity and discontinuity.

Bataille posits that eroticism is the "assenting to life up to the point of death." He explains that though we are discontinuous beings in that we will die, we spend our lives seeking continuity. Continuity can only be glimpsed in the realm of eroticism because it essentially "opens the way to death" and thus our ability to achieve continuity. For Bataille, death is continuity. Because we are mortally fragmented, we can never be fully present or self-identical beings. Nostalgia is responsible for all three types of eroticism, identified thus: the physical, the religious, and the emotional and all are predicated on violence. Nostalgia is a yearning for our lost continuity. Bataille suggests that in sexual

reproduction, the sperm and ovum are discontinuous, separate entities that die upon their fusion. The moment of fusion is classified as a continuity that ultimately results in the development of a new, discontinuous being. The most violent experience for a being is death, and it is the recognition of our mortality that underpins eroticism. Bataille explains: “Only violence can bring everything to a state of flux this way, and the nameless disquiet bound up with it. We cannot imagine the transition from one state to another one basically unlike it without picturing the violence done to the being called into existence through discontinuity” (*Death and Sensuality* 17). Existence itself is in the interstice between continuity and discontinuity, and in order to oscillate between the two, there needs to be a form of violence. Eroticism opens the path to death, and death is nothing more than the denial of our individual, separate lives.

In physical eroticism, the two discontinuous beings fuse together briefly to produce a moment of continuity. In physical eroticism, the woman is the sacrificed body and the man is the sacrificer. In sex “The female partner in eroticism was seen as the victim, the male as the sacrificer, both during the consummation losing themselves in the continuity established by the first destructive act” (*Death and Sensuality* 18). While Usher’s eroticism is not focused on the genitalia, Madeline’s body still becomes the sacrificed object in his erotic act. His eroticism is a kind of synthesis of physical and religious eroticism. In religious eroticism, there is a similar manifestation of violence vis-à-vis the sacrificed and the witnesses. The sacrifice reveals the sacredness, or continuity, to the discontinuous beings who watch. Bataille says “The victim dies and the spectators share what his death reveals [...] This sacredness is the revelation of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite” (*Death and Sensuality* 22). Emotional

eroticism is closely related to physical in the act of love. The spiritual fusion of two lovers dissolves discontinuity, but this happiness can only be understood in terms of its suffering. The suffering is the awareness of discontinuity, and the desire to be continuous can sometimes lead to the powerful feelings of homicide and suicide.

By entombing her, Usher is finally able to possess Madeline and confine her so that she remains permanently below him. The vault that holds her body happens to be directly below his sleeping quarters. Bataille's discussion of the power dynamic of sexual intercourse understands the man as active and the woman as passive. The man dominates the woman in a physical way and in terms of power relations. Usher sacrifices Madeline's body in an effort to achieve the continuity that he so desperately yearns for but is left unfulfilled because it turns out that she is not really dead and is just as subversive as ever. His unrest may also signify a loss of self.

The fissure extends beyond the house to the beings of Roderick and Madeline. While Bataille does not account for what happens in the event of the formation of twins, a reading of the twin phenomenon reveals an additional layer of continuity and discontinuity. As the sperm and ovum, two discontinuous beings, fuse together in a moment of continuity, they yield a new discontinuous being. In the event of twins, such as Roderick and Madeline, the continuous union is interrupted by another division. The zygote splits to produce two new discontinuous beings. The heightened suffering that Roderick experiences following Madeline's entombment may speak to a nostalgia not only for his lost uterine continuity but for the continuity that he once had with his twin sister.

There is a tradition of thought that alleges a psychic connection between twins which Poe employs in this sordid tale of brotherly and sisterly love. Usher's increasing torment may be the result of some sort of empathy he feels for his entombed sister. Beyond the psychical similarities, there are numerous allusions made to their physical similarities. One striking instance is when the narrator notes how they appear to be identical. Looking at the dead Madeline once more before closing the coffin he notes: "A striking similitude between the brother and sister now first arrested my attention; and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them" (211). Male and female twins cannot be identical, but perhaps years of inbreeding have allowed for such a physical anomaly. Or, perhaps, Poe intended for the uncanny likeness to be interpreted as the inextricability of their persons. They are mutually embroiled, entwined, genetically and psychically. They at times seem to share subjectivity.

What happens then to Roderick following the entombment of his sister is a total breakdown. As Madeline lay dying, Roderick also starts to deteriorate. The narrator notes "The pallor of his countenance has assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue" (211). This is one example of many that describes Roderick as being corpse-like. Roderick seems to abandon himself to the madness consuming him. According to Foucault, the loss of subject in philosophical language seeks "not to recapture itself, but to test the extremity of its loss" (Foucault 43). If we understand Roderick's subjectivity as being bound up with Madeline's, the loss of her represents a loss of his self, too. Rather than trying to

recapture his self, he pushes the boundaries of his loss by giving himself over to madness and yielding to his physical decomposition.

In her book *The Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva describes the abject as where meaning collapses. The abject inspires horror in the subject because it threatens the breakdown of meaning that the subject depends on to understand itself. Such a breakdown occurs when there is a break between the subject and object. Kristeva says this breakdown is best evidenced by the presence of the corpse as it forces us to confront our own mortality, though excrement and other unpleasant images might inspire the same reaction. Kristeva's understanding is very much like the eroticism Bataille discusses in the spectacle of a death that presents the viewer with a glimpse of continuity. In his book *The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade*, Bataille's section on Appropriation and Excretion anticipates Kristeva's discussion of abjection. He rattles off a long list of all things transgressive including cadavers and shit, and stresses that "the notion of the (heterogeneous) *foreign body* permits one to note the elementary subjective identity between types of excrement [...] and everything that can be seen as sacred" (*The Use Value* 21). Bataille argues that the bifurcation of the social order into the religious and the profane is not unlike the polarity that exists between appropriation and excretion.

The breakdown of these separations threatens not only to bring about total chaos and potential anarchy but far more terrifying is that the subject will lose his identity and revert to the primal state that precedes the symbolic order. Jacques Lacan calls the pre-symbolic state the imaginary order. The imaginary refers to the time when the infant is unable to differentiate and has yet to form a sense of subjectivity. The nostalgia Bataille discusses may be understood as the yearning for this state of wholeness, but as Lacan

explains, it is impossible to attain, and if we never graduate into the mirror-stage and remain in the imaginary, we are essentially psychotic.

The abject can be divined in various aspects of this tale. Incest, for example, often elicits repulsion because it violates the prevailing social code. It is a well-established boundary that is not supposed to be crossed. The presence of a corpse in the house, Madeline's entombed body that is ever-present, drives Roderick Usher to devolve deeper and deeper into a psychotic state. If Roderick is nostalgic for the wholeness he felt with his sister, then the presence of her corpse represents the breakdown of meaning. She is the abject. Roderick himself can also be read as the abject as he begins to resemble a corpse. The narrator, too, becomes affected by the madness that pervades the house. "It was no wonder that his condition terrified –that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions" (Poe 212). The house and its inhabitants become very haunted by the collapse of meaning that Madeline's simultaneous presence and absence present. She is not really dead, nor is she fully alive. By the narrator's account, she *was* dead when they placed her body in the tomb. Her presence is still felt nevertheless, though, and seemingly haunts the house.

Notions of the haunted and the spectral are critical to this story. Jacques Derrida notes that hauntology and ontology are homophones. Ontology, the study of being, Derrida argues is not unlike hauntology. Being is non-totalizable; we are never fully-present, meaning there is never any stasis to our existence. We are constantly moving forward, hurtling towards our own finitude in a progression that Martin Heidegger calls *Being-Towards-Death*. Thus, we are only traces of being. Likewise, the ghost represents

both presence and absence. The ghost, or specter, lacks a physical, material form, yet is still a presence that manifests. The ghost then becomes the space where meaning collapses as it posits and retracts meaning simultaneously.

Eight days following the burial, the narrator and Roderick have declined deeper into a feeling of dread and haunting: “An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame; and, at length, there sat upon my very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm” (212). Appealing to the allusion of the myth of the incubus suggests that the apprehension the narrator feels is imaginary, and paradoxically, that is real. The incubus, a demonic spirit, is both being and non-being. Such a manifestation is abject because it signifies the dissolution of meaning. Such a manifestation both represents continuity and is continuity. Such a manifestation is also a devious sexuality that collapses the division between being and finitude. It may be that the incubus here is the spirit of the house. It is the manifestation of the transgressive sexuality of the Usher line.

At the end of the tale, the narrator reads to Roderick from a romantic narrative of Sir Launcelot [sic] entitled “The Mad Trist.” Trist [sic] takes on two meanings here: that of a duel between knights, and a sexual encounter. As he reads, the two hear noises in the house that echo the actions in the story. At first, the narrator thinks he is imagining it all, but upon the third instance, he finally asks Roderick if he does not also hear it. Roderick emphatically responds that he does and that it is Madeline who has risen from her grave. It is also at this moment where Roderick confesses that he buried her alive. When the doors throw open, Madeline stands before them, “blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame” (216). Once again, Madeline has proven that she cannot be suppressed, and here is the crescendo of

the madness that has threatened to consume Usher. “With a low moaning cry, [she] fell heavily inward upon her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated” (216). This final moment is a highly sexualized encounter that heralds their deaths.

It is an erotic, violent end for Madeline, Roderick, and the house. As the narrator flees the house, he looks back. “The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely-discernible fissure [...] while I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened” (216). The fissure that defined the limits of the beings of Roderick and Madeline and was the limits to their beings, widens to the point that the whole house collapses into the tarn and vanishes, delivering the epitaph for Madeline, Roderick, and the Usher line. The boundaries that were so violated could not contain them and collapsed, ushering forth the total annihilation of meaning. The crack or fissure of the house could also be read as a vaginal opening. Interpreting the house as body also invites an interpretation of the house as womb. The blood-red light that shines through could then be interpreted as menstrual, or perhaps more aptly, the aftermath of a miscarriage. The house, with its phallic and feminine, is a kind of embodiment of the doubling of Madeline and Roderick, the masculine and feminine twins. In the end, the ancestral house expels them, or aborts them, and dies along with them.

In “Berenice,” the narrator Egæus is also born of a house. Like Roderick’s fears surrounding Madeline Usher’s sexuality, in this story, we see the fears Egæus has of Berenice’s monstrous sexuality and a kind of life cycle of the author. Like “How to Write a Blackwood Article” and “A Predicament,” this story can also be read as both the birth and death of the author. Egæus’s origin in the library could be read as Poe’s

acknowledgment of his paternity in literary innovation. Barthes would say that this death takes place at the moment of creation. In a literal sense, the separation occurs the moment the mother delivers child in childbirth. Egæus's origin story may be Poe's acknowledgment that his authorship depends on the objectification or sacrifice of the female body.

Nancy tells us "the body, bodily, never happens, least of all when it's named and convoked. For us, the body is always sacrificed: eucharist" (*Corpus* 5). This is literally true for Poe. Gruesome tales of dead women are how he makes his living. Staci Poston Conner, however, argues that Berenice "does not neatly fit into the category of Poe's beautiful dead women; although she is presumed to be dead for a portion of the story, she actually never dies, and, further, her beauty is defiled" (Conner 85). The same could be argued for the other stories discussed in this chapter, as neither Ligeia nor Madeline Usher stays dead, but the fact remains that Poe wrote stories centered on how these women's bodies are objectified, mutilated, and consumed. The only other female figure mentioned in this story is when Egæus relates that he is born in a library where: "Here died my mother. Herein was I born" (141). For him to be born, his mother had to be sacrificed.

For Egæus (and Poe as author) to live, Berenice's body is also sacrificed. "Berenice," however, illustrates a breakdown of gender –the author is mother, father, and son which insinuates a holy trinity. For the author to be born, bodies must be sacrificed. In a Barthesian framework, he also must die at the moment of conception. The author lives and dies in this story and is reincarnated over and over again. Egæus says "it is mere idleness to say that I had not lived before –that the soul has no previous existence" (Poe

141). Arthur Brown explains “the narrator's very person is, from its beginnings, intimately connected with reading, and, in the second, since these beginnings were but re-beginnings, reading is linked with a world where death is other than death, where being is perpetuated” (Brown 452). In “Berenice,” the narrator is both author, reader, and character; he is both consumer and consumed. He lives and dies over and over in the chambers of his library.

When referring to the physical space of the library, it is interesting to note Egæus calls it a chamber: “In that chamber I was born” (141) and describes it as an ethereal, otherworldly atmosphere. He continues: “Thus awaking from the long night of what seemed, but was not, nonentity, at once into the very regions of fairy-land—into a palace of imagination—into the wild dominions of monastic thought and erudition” (141). One way of looking at this is that Egæus is describing the birth of a character. He comes to life in a “palace of imagination,” having sprung from some space between entity and nonentity. Egæus, as a character and as author of his own story, feels a loss of agency as when Berenice appears. He is overwhelmingly consumed with thoughts of her and becomes increasingly fixated on her teeth.

Much has already been written about how Egæus needs to reassert his masculine dominance and how he is threatened by Berenice’s femininity. Several scholars have already explored how Egæus’s paranoia is evocative of the *vagina dentata*. I think it is worth noting how both the chamber and her grave conjure a womb. The library nurtures and supports Egæus in his childhood where he “loitered away [his] boyhood in books and dissipated [his] youth in reverie” (141). He is an imaginative, spiritual, but sickly child,

evocative of more of the traits traditionally associated with the feminine. When Egæus comes of age, his focus moves away from carefree reveries and become more fixated:

[It] is wonderful what stagnation there fell upon the springs of my life—  
wonderful how total an inversion took place in the character of my commonest thought. The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn,—not the material of my everyday existence—but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself. (141)

Following directly this passage is the introduction of the character of Berenice. He recalls how he grew up with his cousin, and while he was in poor health, she was the picture of grace, energy, and beauty until “Disense—a fatal disease—fell like the simoom upon her frame” (142). Egæus waxes on about how changed she becomes and laments the loss of her innocence and beauty. The illness Egæus alludes to that afflicts Berenice, like Madeline Usher, is sexual maturity. When he reaches “the noon of manhood [in] the mansion of [his] fathers” (141), Berenice becomes ill. In other words, he leaves his sickly, feminine chamber of childhood and enters the mansion of manhood.

Egæus proposes marriage “in an evil moment” (144), and her sexuality continues to mature, much to his chagrin. It is interesting that Egæus describes Berenice as a beautiful, carefree child, though with sexual maturation, she assumes more classically beautiful characteristics:

The once jetty hair fell partially over [her forehead], and overshadowed the hollow temples with innumerable ringlets now of a vivid yellow [...] I shrank involuntarily from [her] glassy stare to the contemplation of the thin and shrunken

lips. They parted; and in a smile of peculiar meaning, *the teeth* of the changed Berenice disclosed themselves slowly to my view. Would to God that I had never beheld them, or that, having done so, I had died! (145)

Her hair changing from dark to light is an inversion of both beauty ideals and typical physical changes. Poe is playing with the binary of Madonna/whore here. Berenice, who was once innocent and beautiful with dark hair becomes corrupted by her sexuality and assumes blonde ringlets, a characterization more closely associated with the angelic.

Her lips part, as though in ecstasy or arousal, and he becomes fixated on her teeth, symbols of what he deems to be her monstrous sexuality but also, ideas: “*Que tous ses dents etaient: des idées*” (146). He thinks of Berenice’s teeth as ideas and Egæus comes to believe that “their possession could alone ever restore [him] to peace, in giving [him] back to reason” (146). Ideas, as previously noted, are what he believes to be his greatest gift of being born in a library. To restore order and structure to his life, he must possess the teeth. Vivian Lee Givhan argues that his obsession “represents an attempt to regain control of himself and to assert his masculine dominance intellectually, emotionally, and physically” (Givhan 198), but I think of it more as a desire to return to the safety and innocence of his library chamber. For Egæus to resume his life as author of his own story and as a reader wiling away the hours in his library, the cycle of sacrifice must continue. Where his mother died so he could be born, so shall Berenice offer up the ideas he needs to return to his normal state. She is simultaneously the mother or creator and the object of his desire. The binary is further collapsed and transgressed.

As he becomes consumed with thoughts of her teeth, Berenice suffers some sort of unknown illness that makes her appear to be dead and she is consequently buried. In

possessing her in his thoughts, she falls into an epileptic coma. He renders her motionless, helpless. If Berenice's teeth are ideas, and Egæus is a reader that wishes to possess them, we can understand what happens to Berenice as death of the author. Conner and other scholars have written how reading the coffin as a Freudian womb "supports the argument that this confinement infantilizes Berenice, rendering her liminality one not only between life and death but also between childhood innocence and adult sexuality" (Conner 82). I think it also traces the life cycle of the birth of the reader and death of the author. The story ends with Egæus discovering that he has extracted all of Berenice's teeth and that she is not dead but wounded and robbed of reason. A menial comes and "whispered of [a] violated grave – of a disfigured body enshrouded, yet still breathing, still palpitating, *still alive!*" (147). Egæus is covered in blood and mud but has no recollection of his deeds. After the menial points out a spade in the room, Egæus finds a box. In the final line of the story, he narrates: "I could not force it open; and in my tremor it slipped from my hands, and fell heavily, and burst into pieces; and from it, with a rattling sound, there rolled out some instruments of dental surgery, intermingled with 32-small, white and ivory-looking substances that were scattered to and fro about the floor" (147). The story ends with the confrontation of the reality of his actions. He finally has the objects of his desire, but they are scattered –disorganized and chaotic. He does not even seem to recognize them as teeth, but only as "ivory-looking substances." The life cycle of the story ends by tracing conception (teeth as ideas) to materiality. They are a physical product, pieces of her body. Finally, reason is returned to him as he realizes what he has done. We can only assume that Egæus will wake again in his maternal library chamber, loitering away in the stories of his fathers.

#### IV. The Body Politic: “The Man that Was Used Up” and “The Man of the Crowd”

“A body is an image offered to other bodies”—Jean-Luc Nancy

So much of Poe’s work is marked by his fascination and repulsion of boundaries – such as between life and death, human and animal, body and soul. His treatments of these themes appear to be in line with pre-enlightenment preoccupations, but Poe’s body of work also demonstrates very modern sensibilities. The division between human and machine, and chaos and order, for example, are central to his narratives “The Man that Was Used Up” (1839) and “The Man of the Crowd” (1845). Rationalism dispels superstitions, but the unnatural fears are not eliminated, merely displaced. Poe’s writing exhibits the paradox of modernism –the more rational the world becomes, that is, the more detached humanity is from nature, the more animated the unnatural becomes. With the emergence of hyper-rationality and modernism, nature, rather than becoming more in control, reveals its resistance to being humanized, and urbanization –although suggesting community or techno-community –becomes all the more potentially alienating. The so-called dream of enlightenment, a real community of urbanization, becomes indeed, just “mass” alienated culture, a mess of bodies. Shear points out that in Poe’s stories, characters are often “strangely isolated, facing a world that is almost fiendishly physical, one whose material nature they will come to regard as their chief obstacle” (276). Many of Poe’s stories deal with this clash of material or physical boundaries and bodily limits. Shear explains that Poe was a nineteenth-century thinker who attempted to use modern science “to imagine the transcending of material bounds, but scientific thinking itself grounded him in materialism” (276). Further revealed in these two stories is Poe’s very

modern aesthetic as he explores the liberties and constraints of society in transition to modern mass culture.

Many of Poe's critics, including T.S. Eliot and Henry James, refuse to accept him as a serious literary contributor; they dismiss his writing for having mass culture appeal. In "Reading at the Social Limit," Jonathan Elmer attempts to explain Poe's mass culture persistence: "Poe stands simultaneously as the germinal figure of a central modernist trajectory and as the much-acknowledged pioneer of several durable mass-cultural genres: detective fiction and science fiction, as well as certain modes of sensational or gothic horror" (Elmer 2). Certain mass culture genres, such as science fiction, horror and detective fiction have often been regarded as low-brow art since their inception to the present day. But just because these genres appeal to the masses does not necessarily indicate that their value is restricted to entertainment, nor that Poe is anything but critical of mass culture broadly conceived. As we see in Poe's work, he deals with the human condition and sheds light on the anxieties of his age.

Indeed, Poe's work goes way beyond low-brow art. Not everything he wrote was for the sole purpose of entertaining the masses. For example, his theoretical essay "Philosophy of Composition" (1846) is intended for the literati. Elmer addresses Poe's duality as artist and entertainer in an examination of "Philosophy of Composition": "This interest in technique heads in two directions at once, both of which are pursued in their own ways by modernism and mass culture: toward the increasing emphasis on the autonomy of the cultural and artistic worlds, and toward a sophistication of the artistic effect" (Elmer 9). "Philosophy of Composition" is a more obvious example of Poe's artistic depth, but Poe's other writings, particularly those consumed by the mass culture

that critique mass culture, also delineates his modern artistic aesthetic and values as a writer.

“The Man that Was Used Up” is an example of Poe’s early detective fiction in which he critiques and satirizes society in the inventive age. The narrator is first enchanted by the remarkably well-formed and handsome appearance of Brevet Brigadier General A.B.C. Smith, which then impels the narrator to seek out further information about Smith. Reactions to the mention of Smith’s name are variations of the same scripted gossip: “Smith! –why, not General A.B.C.? Bless me, I thought you knew all about him! This is a wonderfully inventive age! Horrid affair that! – a bloody set of wretches, those Kickapoos! –fought like a hero –prodigies of valor –immortal renown. Smith! –Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. –why, you know he’s the man...” (Poe 194). Much to the narrator’s chagrin, each story-teller is interrupted at the same point in the story. Finally, frustration leads him to the General’s bedchamber where he deconstructs the illusion of his seemingly perfect body.

Poe’s distrust of the mob is evident in his depiction of the General –his individuality is abstracted as a consequence of being a mass culture figure. David Blake explores the satirical representation of the General as a cyborg: “Poe’s logic in imagining his hero as a creature of technology rather than providence reveals the ideological background of the General’s endorsement of technology, broadening our sense of the satire’s historical targets” (Blake 329). The General’s admirable physique and reputation are the products of the violent Indian Wars; the narrator, as it turns out, has not been admiring the real physicality or individuality of the General, but the illusion of him.

It is common knowledge among the characters in the story that the General is constructed mainly from prosthetics, and yet the only thing they consider wretched or savage are the Bugaboos and Kickapoos. The General's uncanny, inhuman makeup is instead revered as a wonder "of the modern age" (Poe 192). It seems Poe is expressing the anxiety of how individuality is eradicated in the mob setting. Elmer explains: "What emerges very powerfully in Poe's description of Mob is its overtly figural, factitious, and alien nature (Mob is 'a foreigner, by and by'). Poe's tales return quite regularly to the unnerving encounters with such figures of the social totality, figures felt to be at once illusory and commanding, alien and familiar, in short uncanny –like Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith" (11). It is evident that Poe's mistrust of the mob, or body politic, is a critique of mass culture.

In the modern world, the unnatural becomes animated; the General's prostheses afford him the appearance of a perfect physical constitution and the narrator's curiosity and rational inquiry lead him to discover the alarming truth. The boundary between human (natural) and mechanics (unnatural) becomes so blurred that it is difficult to discern what is real. This paradox is touched on in dialogue spoken by the General himself:

There is nothing at all like it... we are a wonderful people, and live in a wonderful age, Parachutes and rail-roads-man-traps and spring-guns! Our steam-boats are upon every sea, and the Nassau balloon packet is about to run regular trips . . . between London and Timbuctoo... There is really no end to the march of invention. The most wonderful—the most ingenious—and let me add, the most useful—the most truly useful mechanical contrivances, are daily springing up like

mushrooms, if I may so express myself, or, more figuratively, like –ah grasshoppers –like grasshoppers. (Poe 193)

The simile the General uses suggests that the proliferation of technology is as natural as a mushroom pushing through ground or the hop of a grasshopper. The further the modern world strays from nature, the more personified the unnatural becomes.

Urban cities are characterized by their rational organization and linearity, perhaps most evident in their architectural design and industrialization. But the mob, the slums – the fear of poverty and disease – are the chaos at the center. This dichotomy of the structural appearance of order, and the disorder of the mob at its center, parallels the inextricability of modern rational and irrational fears. Henri Lefebvre writes about the reorientation of fears in the rational 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He argues: “As a consequence, the minor superstitions of everyday life, far from being expelled, became ‘over-specialized’ ideological constructs such as horoscopes and exotic beliefs that fostered, rather than overcame, the need for security, moralism and moral order, and were, in fact the reverse of rationalism” (Lefebvre 44).

Poe’s Story “The Man of The Crowd” exemplifies the problem of rationalism Lefebvre describes. When the narrator’s rational system of taxonomy breaks down, he makes very irrational judgments about the old man who has captured his imagination. The story begins with the narrator watching the passers-by through a café window in London. In an attempt to create order, he has developed a system of taxonomy which he employs to classify the types of people in society. He uses his observations of their dress, appearance, and mannerisms to determine their social class, their breeding, their profession and their type of character. What appears to be a rational system is fatally

flawed – he is using external evidence to derive the truth of their inner nature. For example, the narrator observes that upper clerks possess “the affectation of respectability,” and the “voluminousness of wristband, with an air of excessive frankness,” is the hallmark of the pick-pocket (Poe 234). Like Lefebvre, Poe seems to understand that the modern world is not truly rational; rather it is the meeting place of the rational and irrational.

Critics who claim Poe is only concerned with dead ladies and the supernatural have missed the point of “The Man of the Crowd.” It is accurate to observe that he plays off superstitions, but he also plays off the irrationality of the modern world. When the narrator cannot use his system of classification to penetrate the character of the old man, he becomes increasingly concerned with his morality. It is the foreign aspect of the old man that leads the narrator to his illogical conclusions. When the narrator first perceives the old man, he considers that he possesses “a countenance which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention, on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression. Anything even remotely resembling that expression I had never seen before” (Poe 235). What comes into play is a supernatural order – that of good and evil – which substitutes for the narrator’s failed taxonomy.

Walter Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” examines and rejects Baudelaire’s description of the old man as a *flâneur*, a leisured walker who interacts with the objects surrounding him through irrational “correspondences.” The pedestrian, on the other hand, is a very purposeful, mechanized walker. The pedestrian’s irrationality derives from his disregard of his natural surroundings and his undivided attention to technology. According to Benjamin:

The inhabitant of the great urban centers...reverts to a state of savagery that is of, isolation. The feeling of being dependent on others is blunted in the smooth functioning of the social mechanism. Any improvement of this mechanism eliminates certain modes of behavior and emotions. Comfort isolates; on the other hand, it brings those enjoying it closer to mechanization. (Benjamin 174)

Neither the old man nor the narrator fits into either category of *flâneur* or pedestrian. The old man seems to take no pleasure in his perambulations, nor is he heading to a specific destination. Rather he wanders aimlessly, which baffles the narrator to no end. Benjamin describes walking through a modern city:

Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery [...] Whereas Poe's passers-by cast glances in all directions which still appeared to be aimless, today's pedestrians are obliged to do so in order to keep abreast of traffic signals. Thus, technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. (175)

If Benjamin were alive today, he might observe just how slavish people have become to technology to the near extinction of the *flâneur*. The prevalence of eyes and fingers occupied with the technology of cell phones and other gadgets, and earbuds that blot out the surrounding sounds, disconnects people from their environment. It is a social anxiety that these tech-heads wish to stave off. They are so afraid of isolation that they must stay connected through technology; this is irrational of course because they are effectively detaching themselves from reality.

What makes “The Man that Was Used Up” and “The Man of the Crowd” so effective is Poe’s keen insight into the anxieties of the modern world. His sensitivity to the relationships between the rational and irrational, order and chaos, human and inhuman are what make his writing palpable and relevant to readers, past and present. John Tresch explains: “Poe’s work took the machine as its subject and is inscribed within a literary practice thoroughly permeated by a recently industrialized mode of production. He used this combination to exploit unsettled anxieties about human progress and mechanization” (Tresch 278). This anxiety is pointedly manifest in the closing lines of “The Man of the Crowd” when the narrator declares that the old man: “is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd...* The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the ‘Hortulus Animae,’ and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that ‘*er lasst sich nicht lessen*’” (Poe 239). The footnote in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Selected Writings of Poe* suggests that the German translation could mean that the man is too shocking to be read or refer to the narrator’s failure to understand the old man.

John Tresch goes a step further and charges that Poe’s aesthetic parallels the modern machine: “In Poe’s complex metaphors the irreducible agent responsible for the actions visible on the outer surface of seemingly rational structures is itself machinic. Further analysis would show this structure of shifting screens of the natural and the mechanized, of chaos and control” (Tresch 290). Poe’s ability to move between the Aristotelian *a priori* logic that dominates his gothic horror stories and the inductive reasoning of scientific inquiry in his detective fiction shows the conscious literary control of his artistic genius. Unfortunately, many do not see it this way. Critic Charles Sanford

ridicules Poe for being juvenile, narcissistic, neurotic and unoriginal. He accuses him of pretentious language: “Poe’s ubiquitous personal pronoun ‘I’ always has the tone of saying to the reader, ‘Look at me! See how clever I am, how diabolical, how aristocratic and superior and empty.’ Like a little boy, he wants to show off his bag of tricks, and he has to watch himself doing them” (Sanford 56). Sanford also criticizes the concept of Poe as a modern writer. He contends: “Nowhere...does he present a criminal as the tragic victim or hero of this kind of society, even though his preoccupation with crime was undoubtedly a form of revolt against it” (Sanford 61). What Sanford is missing is that all of Poe’s characters are victims of society: The old man who wanders aimlessly and the narrator who becomes disturbed by his flawed rational obsession in “The Man of the Crowd”; General John A.B.C. Smith, whose value is reduced to the glory of his own physical destruction; and the narrator who is manipulated by the deceptive nature of mechanization are all representations of the displaced fears in modern society.

Sanford was not too far off though when he says that Poe’s writing revolts against society, although “revolt” may not be the best word. Poe was a critic of modern society and mass culture, but he was also the product of it. Being a mass culture writer indeed makes Poe a modern writer, and most definitely does not diminish his artistic credentials. Elmer explains: “When mass culture is seen not as one pole of a cultural differentiation but as the very terrain of ongoing social mediations... then Poe appears no longer as anomalous but rather as exemplary, both in his mix of high and low and in his overt attention to the manipulation of effect” (Elmer 8). It is unfair to judge Poe without considering the context in which he was writing – as a transitional writer in a transitional period.

## V. Conclusion

For Poe, writing about the body proper, the body politic, and the body object afford him the opportunity to negotiate the anxieties of his America. His stories highlight the Cartesian mind-body problem where body and sense are divorced from each other and yet entirely dependent upon each other to construct any sense of the world.

Furthermore, Poe's work brings into question the individual body, his or her relationship to other bodies, and the ways bodies are politicized and consumed by the broader society.

The ontology of being is comprised of an ontology of all bodies. The body is the barrier that separates an individual body from all other bodies; it is a sharing of and departure from self. We use language to understand this barrier, to understand our position in relation to others, and to recognize our own subjectivity. Language, of course, transcends the corporeality of our body. It may be produced by the voice box and vocal cords, but language is not itself corporeal. The written word, the materiality of books, is physical. It is ink on paper. The way Poe writes bodies betrays his unique point of view that prefigures much of what theorists would later discuss. Poe's oeuvre is unique in its steadfast revelation –before theory –of the insights about embodiment that theorists afford us. His social milieu and personal circumstances of alienation led him to write gothic stories that have been enduringly popular and classic at the same time. Yet in doing so, he also allows us to understand the body in its full sublimity. The bodies in Poe's body of work are simultaneously grotesque and beautiful, divine and corrupt, imbued with sense and without any sense. They speak to the struggle for immortality that authors once claimed absolutely but that by his example, we now know is a legacy of works not merely a matter of branding.

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