

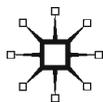
Pictures of Ascent in
the Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe

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the Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe

Douglas Anderson

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PICTURES OF ASCENT IN THE FICTION OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

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When storms rage and we fear the shipwreck of the state, there is nothing nobler for us to do than let down the anchor of our studies into the peaceful ground of eternity.

Johannes Kepler, 1628

An infinity of error makes its way into our Philosophy, through Man's habit of considering himself a citizen of a world solely—of an individual planet—instead of at least occasionally contemplating his position as cosmopolite proper—as denizen of the universe.

Poe, "Marginalia" (June 1849)

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Preface

Readers of this book who are familiar with the conventions of academic prose will immediately recognize that the following pages strive to keep their extraneous professional cargo to a minimum. Poe's fiction is filled with extravagantly overfurnished rooms or badly stowed ships that reflect the mental disarray of their occupants. Mindful of the fate of many of these characters, I have tried to jettison all unavoidable encumbrances—replacing footnotes, for instance, with a succinct account of the secondary resources I have used for each chapter in an appendix to the book. Nearly fifty years ago Richard Wilbur suggested that Poe's overwrought interiors depict the visionary consciousness of a poetic soul besieged by the mundane, physical world. The warfare between these two antagonists, Wilbur believes, is Poe's "fundamental subject." Over time, this view of Poe's fascination with decor has come to strike me as too schematic. His heroes and narrators frequently find themselves surrounded by a gorgeous clutter that the poetic consciousness ultimately sheds—a tactic I propose to emulate as best I can.

These five chapters take as their point of departure the provocative conjunction between Italo Calvino's striking lecture on "Lightness," from *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, and the trajectory of Poe's professional life. Calvino cites Poe as one of the artistic predecessors whose engagement with the "existential function of literature" most influenced what Calvino terms his own "search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living." Poe's imagination was forced to contend with this crippling weight in a number of personal and cultural forms: a ballast of material and psychological affliction aptly symbolized by the 1832 and 1849 worldwide cholera outbreaks that almost perfectly frame Poe's career. To such challenges his fiction repeatedly responds with vivid explorations of cognitive possibility that he came to understand as the transmutation of "rudimentary" into "ultimate" life. Poe coined these

terms late in his career to describe an expressive struggle that lies at the heart of his work. I hope to establish the seriousness and the coherence of that struggle through a deep excursion into the literal and figurative pictures of ascent that shape the experiential world of his tales.

Quotations from Poe's stories and reviews, identified by an abbreviation and a page number, are drawn almost entirely from the generous collections published by the Library of America: *Poetry and Tales* (PT), prepared by Patrick Quinn, and *Essays and Reviews* (ER), prepared by G. R. Thompson. In a handful of cases, I cite T. O. Mabbott's *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) by abbreviation (CW), volume, and page number when I need to present material that Poe included in early versions of one or two stories but cut from the later reprintings that modern editors customarily follow—a trimming away of textual ballast that sometimes enhances narrative buoyancy at the expense of details that help illuminate Poe's intentions. Mabbott's volumes have been recently reissued by the University of Illinois Press and remain an indispensable guide to the editorial evolution of Poe's fiction. Without his exhaustive efforts, Poe's artistic life would have remained almost entirely inaccessible to today's reader, obscured behind the apparent stability and security of dozens of contemporary collections of his work.

I am grateful to the University of Georgia for extending to me the continued support of the Sterling-Goodman Professorship. The Research Media office at the University of Georgia, the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, the Library and the Special Collections Department of the American Museum of Natural History, the permissions and imaging staff of the J. Paul Getty Museum, and the New York Public Library helped with obtaining and preparing illustrations. Brigitte Shull and Lee Norton at Palgrave Macmillan moved the manuscript through the evaluation and editorial process with great efficiency and care.

I cannot stress too strongly that this book is not an attempt to resituate Poe's work in literary or cultural history, to adapt a new interpretive vocabulary to his stories or his life, to engage at any length in the kind of critical friction that often characterizes literary scholarship, or to offer an original vision of Poe's meaning. The following pages may contribute, in some measure, to all of those goals, but their primary purpose is to serve as a vehicle for the reader's renewed immersion in Poe's language. Much of what I present may seem obvious to many admirers of Poe's work, but I hope it will not be the less welcome or the less refreshing for being so. I am mindful of one of Poe's own, exhilarating

critical pronouncements early in “The Rationale of Verse”: “In one case out of a hundred a point is excessively discussed because it is obscure; in the ninety-nine remaining it is obscure because excessively discussed. When a topic is thus circumstanced, the readiest mode of investigating it is to forget that any previous investigation has been attempted.” In the following chapters, for better or for worse, I have tried to take this advice.