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## POE: OPTICS, HYSTERIA, AND AESTHETIC THEORY

There is reason, it is said, in the roasting of eggs,  
and there is philosophy even in furniture.  
——E. A. Poe, “The Philosophy of Furniture.”

The science of optics plays an essential role in Poe’s psychopathology of perception. Optical tricks in the tales are often caused or encouraged by the decor, and, in fact, the scientific study of perception not only drew on optical phenomena, but, later in the century, on the presence of these phenomena in decorative objects. Optical illusions or fallacies in vision are in fact subtle variations on a problem that occupied psychiatrists, psychologists, and philosophers throughout the 19th century: the problem of distinguishing illusions of the senses from hallucinations. From the 1820s to the 1840s, important advances in optics were being made, and popular as well as intellectual interest was high. As C. J. Wright points out in his 1980 article, “The ‘Spectre’ of Science: Optical Phenomena and the Romantic Imagination,”<sup>1</sup> the very uncertainty surrounding some of the laws of optics as well as the advances in the field were responsible for this keen interest. The element of uncertainty would, of course, play into the mysteries of the Gothic tale and the mysteries of the mind and perception. Poe’s familiarity with the work of Sir David Brewster, author of *Letters on Natural Magic* (1832), *A Treatise on Optics* (1835, published in America in 1843), and inventor of the kaleidoscope (1816) and the stereoscope (1838) is well-documented.<sup>2</sup>

The sorts of prized optical phenomena in nature in the early 19th century included parhelia, circular rings, lunar haloes, inversion of views (for example, along the Firth of Forth), the *aurora borealis* (one could re-create this effect by directing sunlight through a prism into vapors of wine spirits), the “Fata Morgana” (a well-known optical illusion), coronas and glories (the ap-

1. To Wright’s examples, I would add the analogy of the German psychologist, poet, and metaphysician, Lotze [*Medical Psychology*, 1853]: the soul is like a lens that would concentrate in one indivisible point all the rays reflected by a colored surface.

2. W. K. Wimsatt has found that much of Poe’s 1836 article on “Maelzel’s Chess-Player” was taken from Brewster’s *Letters on Natural Magic*. Walter Shear discusses Poe’s interest in the optical “trick” of indirect perception in relation to his knowledge of Brewster [“Poe’s Use of an Idea about Perception,” *American Answers and Queries*, May/June 1983].

pearance of an aura or halo around an object or a person in certain lights), and spectres. “Spectre-hunting became a fashionable pursuit,” according to Wright. “Shadowy figures,” “airy phantoms,” appear to the view in certain misty terrains; these “spectres” [described by Brewster, 1832]<sup>3</sup> are simply the magnified projection of one’s own body. They are thus, as Wright notes, the “ideal image of the *alter ego*.” In addition, the public flocked to spectacles that used the magic lantern and back projection onto gauze such as Philipstal’s Phantasmagoria in early 19<sup>th</sup> century London.<sup>4</sup> It was capable of rapidly changing the size of figures or of transforming one figure into the other. At the same time, as belief in spiritism grew, charlatans used the same techniques to produce spirit manifestations. Brewster provided a list of “amusing” and frightening effects one could obtain with the stereoscope. (1) Images can be made to *dissolve* before one’s eyes (plane pictures viewed by reflected light exhibit a particular scene, but when viewed by transmitted light the scene is completely transformed). The alternating images are often antithetical (winter snowscape/summer verdure; architectural splendor/the same edifice in ruins). This technique was already in use in the cosmorama; the use of binocular, or stereoscopic pictures, considerably heightens the effect. (2) Changing the right and left eye pictures in the stereoscope causes convex to become concave and vice-versa. The viewer *assumes* that the light is coming from a different direction, and that is what causes the optical trick: a clear case of the mental process distorting the sensation/perception. (3) An optical illusion is created by photographing a group of people where a woman in the group moves to a second position after only a few seconds; she then appears to dissolve before one’s eyes. (4) A transparent figure can be achieved by using a large lens that receives rays issuing from figures situated behind other bodies. These figures and forms that “decompose” and then magically become whole again would have held great fascination for Poe.

Like Brewster, Poe uses optics for amusing as well as for frightening effects. In the comic tale, “The Spectacles,” the young narrator, too vain to wear glasses, falls in love “at first sight” with his own great, great-grandmother. As in “Usher,” desire is all in the family, and the familiar is made unfamiliar, here because of the deformations caused by the hero’s vision.

The theme of scientific discovery appears in the first paragraph, but here, only to be mercilessly parodied. “Magnetoesthetics” is the scientific phe-

3. They are also described by James Hogg in “Nature’s Magic Lantern” [1837, posthumous] and in the Edinburgh scientific journal [EPJ 9.218, 1821].

4. The Phantasmagoria opened in 1902 and was an exhibition of dissolving views and optical illusions produced by a magic lantern. The word also signifies a series of phantasms or illusions which appear to the mind in a nightmare or frenzy. This acceptance of the word will appear later in the text of “Berenice.”

nomenon where desire and affection “arise as if by electrical sympathy,” brought about, “riveted by a glance” [Poe, *Complete* 477]. (In “Berenice” too the gaze is “riveted”— the word appears four times in four pages — with the radical consequences we will have occasion to analyze.) The themes of illusion and deception are presented almost immediately. Despite the admitted deficiency in vision, the narrator believes in love “at first sight” (repeated five times). In fact, in gazing at the Object of his desire, he perceives only a blur. Thus, love will necessarily be based on an optical illusion. As in the Gothic tales, an indescribably intense sensation or emotion “thrill[s] every nerve of [his] frame” [497] and is accompanied by decorative detail, here, rich lace, a diamond ring, a jewelled bracelet. The immense force of this deformation of vision focused on the Object of desire is such that the transit between the sense organ, sensation, and mind admits of no gap. The hero is certain of his perception; that is what makes this tale a parody. “A magnetic sympathy of soul for soul, seemed to rivet, not only my vision, but my whole powers of thought and feeling, upon the admirable object before me. I saw—I felt—I knew that I was deeply, madly, irrevocably in love” [498]. “It was love supreme — indescribable” [501]. The intensity of the gaze and the fascination of the Object are described in quite the same way in “Berenice” and in “Ligeia.” Another echo of “Berenice” is that the beloved’s “pearly teeth” are removable (in the case of Mme Lalande in “The Spectacles” this is merely due to advanced age). Echoing “Ligeia,” the narrator is intrigued by “her eyes—her magnificent eyes” [503].

The lighting is arranged in such a way so that when the narrator again meets his idol, Mme Lalande, they remain in “a very agreeable shadow.” Mme Lalande hesitantly accepts her admirer’s offer of marriage, but only after giving him her double eye-glass which he, in turn, promises to wear as of the day of their marriage. The “little ocular assistant” is a “magnificent toy, richly chased and filigreed, and gleaming with jewels” [508]. On the next page, too, the optical instrument is called a toy. This qualification leads one to think of other ocular toys in the period, the kaleidoscope or the stereoscope, for example. After the marriage, at the climactic moment of erotic expectation, just as in the Gothic tales, illusion based on sensory distortion turns to horror as the Real breaks through to the narrator’s consciousness with full force. The narrator dons the spectacles and, for the first time, truly sees his newly-wedded wife.

This astonishment was profound—was extreme —indeed I may say it was horrific. What, in the name of everything hideous, did this mean? Could I believe my eyes?—could I?—that was the question. . . . were those wrinkles? . . . And . . . what—what—what—what had become of her teeth? . . . I . . . [lept] to my feet, . . . grinning and foaming . . . utterly speechless with terror and with rage. [511.]

(The narrator goes into an epileptic frenzy and screams “at the top of his voice” as he realizes that he has married his great, great grandmother.) As in “Berenice,” “Ligeia” and “Morella,” the beautiful becomes hideous and decayed (the lover’s flesh decomposes before his eyes). But, instead of decay being heavily sexualized and serving as the ultimate release for the Subject’s desire, it functions as a burst of comic release. The comic effect becomes all the more hilarious and grotesque when one knows “Berenice”: the missing teeth make one think of the peregrinations of Berenice’s teeth. The forcefulness of the Real, made possible here solely by the initial deformations of vision or optical tricks, overwhelms the narrator, casting doubt on his sensory perceptions and then making him hysterical.<sup>5</sup>

The doubt cast on the reality of what is perceived is present in all Poe stories, and is especially prominent in those where the Subject’s mental equilibrium is in question. This is to be expected, since the more difficult it is to distinguish illusions of the senses from hallucination, the more one may hesitate between different readings/perceptions of the text (the supernatural, the scientific, the psychological). This is why optical phenomena, vacillating between these three fields, are so appropriate to Poe’s tales.

Just as Poe uses theories of animal magnetism to create supernatural effects in the tales, he also uses optical phenomena that were much-discussed occurrences to simultaneously suggest mysterious, supernatural events and curious perceptual problems that occur somewhere within the as-yet-uncharted circuitry of the brain, the nerves, and the sense organs. The narrator of “The Fall of the House of Usher,” for example, describes the frightening atmosphere surrounding the mansion as “merely electrical phenomena” or caused by the rank “miasma of the tarn” [Poe, *Short Works* 233]. These natural and “supernatural” optical phenomena appear regularly in Poe’s tales, just as they do in other Gothic and Romantic texts. One thinks of “The Ragged Mountains,” the superimposition of Usher’s head and the façade of the House as seen in the mirror of the tarn, Ligeia’s emergence out of Rowena and the arabesque decor, or “Eleanora” where the prismatic, spectrum-colored sensation represents the ever-sought after and analyzed heightened consciousness. Poe, in fact, is crucially interested in finding the answers to the questions science was posing—and would pose later in the century—in the field of perception. D. H. Lawrence has written that “Poe is rather a scientist than an art-

5. In addition to deformations of vision, this text hilariously plays with deformations of sound. “Monsieur Simpson vill pardonne me for not compose de butefulle tong of his contree so vell as might. . . . am I not ready speak de too moshe?” [504.] Or the succession of names in the narrator’s family tree: Moissart, Voissart, Croissart, and Napoleon Bonaparte Froissart.

ist” [Lawrence 70]. This is right — and wrong: science *becomes* aesthetic theory in Poe, and is used to create new aesthetic forms.

The 1835 tale, “Berenice,” poses problems of perception and psychopathology similar to those found in “Usher” and “Ligeia,” but in a highly condensed form. These two fields are linked to an aesthetics that draws on the decorative arts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The narrator in “Berenice” suffers from monomania, and Berenice from epilepsy and trance, both forms of hysteria in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century psychiatry. The specific form that this monomania takes is that of focusing an inordinate amount of attention on decorative objects and design. In “Berenice,” the singular, visionary character of the “ancient race” from which the hero is descended is supposedly made “evident” by the choice of interior decor in the family mansion. Decor is not only a sign of the hero/narrator’s uniqueness, but of his peculiar and modern aesthetic, an aesthetic of *abstraction*.<sup>6</sup>

The specific visionary talent of the narrator is contradictory: “the realities of the world affected [him] as visions . . . while the wild ideas of the land of dreams” [Poe, *Short Works* 153] became his entire existence. This “inversion,” as he calls it, will be followed by other inversions, for example, Berenice’s transformation from radiant health and beauty to disease and hideousness. (The same inversion appears in “Morella” where “the most beautiful [becomes] the most hideous,” and, in somewhat varied form, in “Ligeia” and in “Usher”). His form of hysteria, a monomania “of a novel and extraordinary form . . . consist[s] in a morbid irritability of those properties of the mind . . . termed the *attentive*” [154].<sup>7</sup> It is precisely the nature of this disease that will interest us here. For hours, his “nervous intensity of interest . . . [is] riveted to some frivolous device in the margin, or in the typography of a book, . . . [or to] a quaint shadow falling aslant on the tapestry” [155]. A “device” is an ornament, and the other image is also one of decorative design. “Morbid attention [is] thus excited,” stimulated, by decorative objects. Why? Because they encourage optical illusion, and because they are abstract. Another form of abstraction is in sound repetition, surely the most obvious feature of Poe’s style; the narrator monotonously repeats a common word until it ceases “to convey any idea whatever to the mind” [155]. These objects or

6. The exploration of this aesthetic is either responsible for or directly tied to what Poe calls the ideal poetic subject, the death of a beautiful woman.

7. Here, as elsewhere, Poe is in advance of psychological, philosophical, and aesthetic inquiry by half a century. At the end of the century, James Sully in England, Théodule Ribot and Henri Bergson in France, and Alois Riegl in Austria would pinpoint the faculty of attention as the primary motor of perception and as the basis of aesthetic experience. See especially Sully, who is the first to have insisted that a theory of mind must *begin* with a theory of attention [*Outlines of Psychology*, 1884] and Ribot’s *Le Mécanisme de l’attention* (1888).

sounds, emptied out of meaning, rendered abstract, thus enter a visionary realm where they transcend reality and where the Subject's sensory perceptions of them attain a strangeness that approaches pain. He again emphasizes that these objects are enjoyed for themselves, not as instigators of speculation. They are "*invariably frivolous*." It is Théodore Gautier's 1835 manifesto of "l'art pour l'art" carried to its logical conclusion, something Gautier himself did in an article in *L'Artiste* (28 February 1858).

In this review, Gautier points out that only pure ornament—and by this he means non-representational ornament—can *invent* new forms, and is thus one of the highest forms of artistic imagination. Ornament, for Gautier the writer and art critic, is grossly under-valued. He is not the only critic or theorist in 19th-century France to say so, but he is one of the few writers of prose fiction to do so. Poe, in making the arabesque and the grotesque guiding forms and concepts in the tales, was putting into practice the same aesthetic ideal that was announced by Gautier.

In the 1847 *Nouveau manuel complet du dessinateur*, C. Boutereau writes that the arabesque, originally modeled on plant life, now finds its models only in the Chimera engendered by sleep. They are "the dreams of painting. Let the designer refrain from abandoning himself to all the caprices of a disordered imagination; there are certain limits that reason and taste never allow one to overstep" [284]. Arabesque designs, in shifting their model from nature to dreams and chimera (i.e., the realm of the unconscious), carry a danger which was not lost on aestheticians and critics of the time: their propensity to extravagance, infinite extension and perceptual confusion often leads to a loss of limits. As the writer notes, these limits are not only those of good taste, but also those boundaries where mental equilibrium falters. Other analogies concerning abstract form and altered states were drawn. In the 1880s, the aesthetician Charles Blanc noted that, thanks to its repetitiveness, Islamic art inspire[s] reverie and "a sort of moral drunkenness" [72-73]. Thus we see Sir Walter Scott accusing E. T. A. Hoffmann of indulging "in the *sickly* fantasies of the grotesque or arabesque." Scott abhors the way Hoffmann uses the arabesque to dazzle the reader, disorienting him/her by its formal complications and ambiguity.

In the same decade that designers were being warned of the dangers of the arabesque, Poe was writing his *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. It is not difficult to understand how "Ligeia"'s narrator can exclaim, "Alas, I feel how much even of incipient madness might have been discovered in the gorgeous and fantastic draperies . . . in the Bedlam patterns of the carpets of tufted gold!" Because of its *trompe-l'œil* of concave and convex, the arabesque patterns that cover tapestry, carpet, and draperies alike change according to the

position of the viewer. From one point of view, they partake of “the true character of the arabesque, but as one approaches, they become “ghastly forms... that arise in the guilty slumbers of the monk” [186].

Poe’s astonishingly modern idea of making Roderick Usher an abstract artist corresponds to his own aesthetic of prose. In the *Marginalia* of 1844, Poe wrote:

There is . . . a class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are *not* thoughts, and to which, *as yet*, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language. In these fancies—let me now term them psychal impressions—there is really nothing even approximate in character to impressions ordinarily received. It is as if the five senses were supplanted by five myriad others alien to mortality. [Foye 42.]

These impressions, the rapidly shifting abstract images of the hypnagogic state, are “glimpses of the spirit’s outer world.” I believe that Poe uses abstract decorative design and the description of optical phenomena to represent these “psychal impressions.” It is impossible not to think of Brewster’s kaleidoscope in this context: abstraction and decoration. Brewster himself suggested that the kaleidoscope “might be of assistance to designers of textiles, tiles, and various ornaments.” His suggestion was not ignored; Victor Mucha, for one, drew interesting parallels between the kaleidoscope and ornamental composition [*Combinaisons ornementales*, 1896]. Moreover, in reference to the hypnagogic state, it has been noted that this instrument seems to be modeled on the visual patterns generated by the brain. The kaleidoscope is almost certainly the inspiration for Poe’s 1842 tale, “Eleonora,” where the setting, the “Valley of the Many-Colored Grass,” might well be understood as “Many-Colored Glass.”

Abstract art is either the idea of an hysteric like Usher, or of someone who is a serious student of the decorative arts and of advances in optics.<sup>8</sup> Berenice, the narrator’s cousin, possesses a “gorgeous yet fantastic beauty” and an abundance of energy. However, *while the narrator gazes upon her*, a fatal disease—a species of epilepsy often terminating in trance—sweeps over her, changing her physically, mentally, and morally, “disturbing even the identity of her person” [154]. What is more, the trance states often closely resemble “positive dissolution” [154]. In parallel fashion, the narrator’s own disease assumes the morbid character I’ve described.

8. Justinus Kerner, a German scientist and Romantic poet who wrote a treatise on somnambulism in 1824 and on clairvoyance in 1829, also created a form of visual abstraction. Toward the end of his life, nearly blind, he began experimenting with drops of ink on paper which, when folded, took on fantastic forms. He then composed poems on each of the images. They were published posthumously as *Klecksographien*. Needless to say, these images later inspired the psychological tests of Hermann Rorschach.

it is in no manner possible to convey to the mind of the merely general reader, an adequate idea of that nervous *intensity of interest* with which . . . the powers of meditation . . . busied and buried themselves, in the contemplation of even the most ordinary objects. [155.]

His “undue, earnest, and morbid attention” is thus excited by objects “*invariably frivolous*, although assuming, through the medium of [his] distempered vision, a refracted and unreal importance” [156].<sup>9</sup> The narrator’s hysteria is, as I have said, directly tied to the contemplation of ornamental design.

The text posed an initial query: “How can the unlovely come out of beauty?” The answer can be found in the narrator’s shift of visual attention from these objects to Berenice. We will see the same attention or distortions of vision at work, and I will immediately state the belief that the manner in which they “work on” Berenice springs from the practice of contemplating abstract design. The contemplation of beautiful things is experienced as displeasure (“the meditations were *never pleasurable*” [156]); and the inanimate is animated by the gaze, and by the play of light or by the *trompe-l’œil* of concave/convex. Visual fascination now focuses on the “appalling distortion” of Berenice’s personal identity [157]. This is true to Poe’s formulations on the poetic vision. “An artist is an artist only by dint of his exquisite sense of Beauty—a sense affording him rapturous enjoyment, but at the same time implying, or involving, an equally exquisite sense of Deformity or disproportion” [Poe, *Complete Works* 175]. In strangeness or deformity, one apprehends the vague, the unknown; it is one of Poe’s ways of approaching the complexities and abstractions of aesthetics and of the spiritual realm. Berenice was at first “an abstraction” [Short Works 157] in the narrator’s mind. But here the term is used to mean an object to analyze, not one which totally absorbs the self and thus *by-passes* the normal perceptual circuitry of sense organs to brain as do the decorative designs I have mentioned and as a decorative aspect of Berenice’s diseased person will now do in the narrative. Up until now, the feelings of the narrator had been of the mind and Berenice had been an object of analysis; now they pervade his body. He shudders, grows pale, and an icy chill runs through his frame. *Because of her sudden repulsiveness, he now perversely wants to marry her. She appears before him—vacillating and indistinct in outline—as the “misty influence of the atmosphere,” “the uncertain twilight,” and the gray draperies around her figure contribute to the effect of uncertain perception, optical illusion, and sudden manifestation.*

The hair overshadowed the hollow temples with innumerable ringlets now of a vivid yellow and jarring discordantly, in their fantastic character, with the

9. Note the assimilation of the vocabulary of optics with the unreal. Emphasis, here, as above, is Poe’s.



reigning melancholy of the countenance. The eyes were lifeless, and lustreless, and seemingly pupil-less, and I shrank involuntarily from [them] to . . . 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. [158.]

The repetition of shrank/shrunken represents the mirroring of the perceiver and the perceived, just as the “chamber” and its decor are mirrored in the “disordered chamber” [158] of the Subject’s brain. If Poe’s description allows us (and the narrator) to hesitate between the notion of optical illusion and that of hallucination (“was it my own excited imagination?”), then surely what follows *must* be classified as an hallucination: the “ghastly *spectrum* of the teeth,” which he sees in every object. The perception seems to have “brand[ed] itself on [the] memory.” But Brewster would say that the image had simply remained on the retina. He believed that the whole sensory apparatus was traversed simply in *recalling* an object, and in after-images, the spectra are retinal. “Such [ocular] spectra follow the movements of the eye; as long as the retina remains impressed with the image, the latter obscures real objects on [or in front of] a dark surface” [Tuke 445]. Poe’s narrator tells us the chamber is dark, gloomy—as are all interiors in this sort of tale. One begins to comprehend what ramifications such theories might have for a possible confusion between illusions of the senses in day-to-day reality and hallucinations or supernatural phenomena. Brewster explains the concealment of external objects by ocular spectra by recognized laws of optics. This discussion is taken up in 1884 in James Sully’s *Outlines of Psychology*. By this time confusion between illusion and hallucination was at a peak. A commentator on Sully’s book notes in 1889 that he has several *medical* friends and colleagues who experience “visualization” (seeing spectral figures); these are “visual hallucinations in . . . person[s] of perfectly sound mind” [Tuke 451]. And, as early as 1846, Dr. Lélut, in France, would propose that “hallucination is almost nothing more than the somewhat ‘forced’ result of a normal act of the intelligence, the highest degree of the sensorial transformation of the idea” [Lélut 47]. That is precisely how Poe is now going to describe the processes of sensory perception and ideation in the narrator’s mind. “The teeth!—the teeth! . . . long, narrow, and excessively white, with the pale lips *writhing about them*”: an arabesque frame for glittering mother-of-pearl [Poe 159; emphasis mine]. He longs for them “with a phrenzied desire” [Poe 159]. Poe then makes quite clear that what is at stake in this form of hysteria is the power of optical tricks to transform matter into ideas and, conversely, ideas into matter:

They—they alone were present to the mental eye. . . . I held them in every light. I turned them in every attitude. . . . I dwelt upon their peculiarities. . . . I shuddered as I assigned to them, in imagination, a sensitive and sentient power. . . . I . . . believed *que toutes ses dents étaient des idées*. . . . ah! here was the idiotic

thought that destroyed me! *Des idées!*—ah, therefore it was that I coveted them so madly! [Poe 159.]

In referring to the mental eye, Poe differs from Brewster who “propose[d] to show that the ‘mind’s eye’ is actually the body’s eye, and that the retina is the common tablet on which both classes of impressions are painted” [Tuke 457]. The confusion between the animate and the inanimate—the ability to invert the two—is destructive and tied to a primitive, frenzied desire to possess the Object, and to see the animate return to the state of the inanimate.<sup>10</sup> And, in the service of this desire is (1) Poe’s (and Usher’s) theory of sentience: that all vegetable life and even inanimate objects possess feeling (sensation) and a will, and (2) the way the decorative animates wood, fabric, etc., by the arabesque’s writhing “movement.” Also, abstract objects, by dint of the fascination they exercise on the Subject, seem to possess a recondite meaning which the narrator feels he must possess. During a second day and night, equally misty, the narrator continues to see the *phantasma* of the teeth floating about the room. We might note that the “changing light and shadows of the chamber” [160] contribute to this optical phenomenon.

At this moment, the narrator is told that Berenice has died of an attack of epilepsy. Of the period between her burial and midnight, though, he has only ambiguous, “dim, and hideous, and unintelligible recollections” [160]. They are full of horror, for what the narrator has repressed is his violation of the grave and of “the disfigured body enshrouded, yet still breathing—still palpitating—*still alive!*” from which he had extracted (with the aid of “some instruments of dental surgery”) “thirty- two small, white, and ivory-looking substances” [161]. These pearl-like decorative objects are now his possessions; the once-animate is now inanimate, just as the supposedly inanimate, dead Berenice is now known to be “still alive.” This is the double source of the narrator’s excitement, the pathological nature of his desire. Berenice’s hysteria is, in fact, the perfect disease for this inversion, for the excessive animation of epilepsy terminates in the catalepsy of the trance. Hence—like Madeline Usher and other, non-fictional men and women of the nineteenth century—hysterics, in a prolonged state of catelepsy, ran the risk of being buried alive. Thus, death can be re-animated and the animate made inanimate through the power of the gaze of the hysteric or the “decorator.” (Nearly all examples of optical illusion or hallucination in Poe have the function of lending life to the inanimate or to giving a phantasmal or corpse-like appearance to the animate.) Decorating coincides with optical illusion, hysteria, delirium, and death. It is

10. I have analyzed this idea in “Ligeia” in an essay entitled “Interior Decoration in Poe and Gilman” [*Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 3, Winter 1991].

in “Ligeia” that Poe most explicitly draws this analogy but, already in 1834, the hero of “The Assignment—a “visionary” like “Berenice”’s hero—had explained: “once I was myself a decorator; but that sublimation of folly [has transformed itself into] wilder visions.” The delirium of the decor is now incorporated *directly* into his being: “like these arabesque censers, my spirit is writhing in fire” [151; emphasis mine].<sup>11</sup>

11. By the *fin-de-siècle* the link between interior decoration and morbid pathology had become evident, and was the object of scientific inquiry. The intermingling and confusion of artifice and reality in decorative patterns and objects had long been encouraged in the century, and the dangers inherent in this form of perceptual play were also apparent. In a chapter on decorative art, Paul Souriau states that in the very principle of decoration with figures, he finds “something irrational and like a slight fissure, that is decidedly very characteristic of this art” [*Imagination* 22-23]. “What a lot of monsters, of chimera, of fantastic forms! . . . a set purpose of caprice, of paradox, of the improbable. . . . Certainly, this art is not the product of pure reason” [22]. “When one pays close attention, the impression can become troubling. . . . Where does its strange charm come from? What is this fancy that haunts our homes, leaving on every object that surrounds us the imprint of its caprice?” [26; emphasis mine]. Decorative art, “more than all others, gives free rein to fantasy and caprice. . . . All of the illusions figurative imagination enjoys playing with are employed in decoration” [94]. But this game can be dangerous: it can become more than simply vertiginous. The temptation toward absolute loss of consciousness is great, says Souriau, and the *vertige* nearly fatal. Throughout the century, aestheticians of the decorative arts warned against an excessive propensity to fantasy. Souriau recognizes that ornament can create anxiety and obsession. Nonetheless, again and again, he invites the reader to fantasize on ornamental decor. Decorative line “invites illusion. Why not lend oneself to this game?” [Souriau, *Suggestion* 60.] Or: “Imagine these bizarre garlands detached from the wall they are decorating, spread out on a table *like a real object*, this would send a shiver up one’s spine” [*Suggestion*, 271]. Souriau, a reader of psychiatric studies, is aware that one can move from a “voluntary play of illusion” such as those he describes in *La Suggestion dans l’art* to “true hallucinations [which] transform the very principles of vision.” Poe’s tales, in this domain, as elsewhere, are remarkable predictions and explorations of ideas that will, years later, attract wide attention in philosophical and scientific research.

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