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The Writing of Melancholia in Edgar Allan Poe and Antoni Malczewski

A student of American and Polish romanticism cannot fail to notice correspondences between Poe and Malczewski on a number of levels. Perhaps the most striking is their parallel obsession with the ineluctable entwinement of Eros and Thanatos, yet affinities range from biography and literary fascinations to themes and motifs, to aspects of language and style, to their positions in respective national romanticisms. Without relating the dismal vicissitudes of Malczewski's short life (1793-1826), marked by failure, abortive venture, and misguided love, suffice it to mention that both writers lost their mothers in childhood, were separated from their siblings and taken into foster care, and received hardly any emotional support from their father figures; both found themselves unfit for military service and had unconventional relationships with women; both shared in the romantic era's widespread fascination with Byron and the vogue for mesmerism;¹ and

¹ Mesmerism, or "animal magnetism," was invented in the 1770s by the Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer as a method of healing patients through regulating the flow of the magnetic fluid in the body. From Paris, where Mesmer resided, its popularity soon spread all over Europe, reaching Warsaw and Vilnius by 1815. Mesmerism later evolved from a quasi-medical practice into a kind of occult religious belief related to spiritualism, and it was in this latter version that it became popular in America in the 1830s. "Mesmeric Revelation" (1844) and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845), commonly received as true accounts of magnetic seances, document Poe's interest in mesmerism and its supposed metaphysical potential. For a brief discussion on these points and a bibliography of related criticism see Silverman, *Mournful* 230-31, 294-95, 487. Malczewski was first attracted to "animal magnetism" in Paris, and his own reputed "mesmeric talent" proved to have disastrous consequences. On his return to the Ukraine he developed a turbulent intimate relationship with a distant relative, Zofia Rucińska, a married woman suffering from nervous spells who came to rely on him for treatment, demanding his constant presence as a requisite for her well-being. Together they moved to Warsaw, where Malczewski soon died in extreme poverty. See Przybylski 129-38; Gacowa 226, 244, 263.

According to Leonard, the earliest American reference to Byron was in the Philadelphia *Portfolio* for March 1809, but the Byronic vogue in the United States began after the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Cantos I and II (1812). It gained momentum over the next decade to reach its peak after Byron's death in 1824, and gradually declined through the 1830s and 1840s. Byron's early American reviewers, favoring the didactic and moralizing tone of much of contemporary prose fiction, often condemned his immorality; one spoke of "that daring wickedness and loathsome licentiousness which distinguishes the head of the Satanic School," another predicted "the most dreadful but yet unavailing torments of his death-bed" (qtd. in Leonard 24, 25). This, however, did not prevent the same magazines from reprinting Byron's poetry. His immense popularity sparked off numerous poetic tributes by American rhymers and countless imitations of his verse. As Longfellow remarked in 1832, there was hardly a village that would not have "its little Byron, its self-tormenting scoffer at morality, its gloomy misanthropist in song" (qtd. in Leonard 20). Young John Greenleaf Whittier was at the time one of the most popular Byronic poets. For more discussion of the early phase of

finally, both died prematurely, having suffered from ill health and nervous exhaustion. Poe, however, was a far more productive writer than Malczewski: during his lifetime he composed about sixty poems, a drama, some seventy tales and sketches, three longer narratives, and the philosophical treatise *Eureka*, as well as numerous essays and reviews, a prolificacy partially imposed by the fact that he had to live by his pen. Malczewski, by contrast, is an *auctor unius libri*, the Byronic tale in verse *Maria* (1825), apart from which he only produced a handful of short, minor pieces in prose or

American Byronism culminating after the English poet's heroic death in Greece, the phase to which Poe's proclaimed fascination with Byron also belongs, see Leonard 19-35. As can be expected of a study published in 1907, Leonard barely mentions Poe (52, 109).

Byron's popularity in Poland, notwithstanding the language barrier, was almost as immediate and no less widespread than it was in the United States. Along with Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott, he was the most celebrated British writer in the nineteenth century. The earliest reference to Byron appeared in *Pamiętnik Warszawski* (vol. 16, 1816), the first journal to champion European romantic literature in Poland. Not surprisingly, just as in the U.S., conservative critics excoriated the English poet for his immorality, abandonment of hope, and "Satanism," all of which could exert a corruptive influence on young people. Still, the 1820s saw the beginning of a wave of Polish translations of Byron's works which continued until the end of the century, and which included Mickiewicz's rendering of *The Giaour* (*Giaur*, 1835). Byron's popularity did not wane with the end of the romantic period; to the contrary, the greatest number of his books saw print in the 1880s and 1890s. At the same time, Byron's influence on Polish romanticism was more profound than on the other side of the Atlantic. Early in their careers most Polish poets aligned themselves with the school of Byron. Firstly, the Byronic tale in verse, which did not get assimilated into American literature, became, along with the ballad and the short lyric, the most widely practiced genre of early Polish romanticism, utilized by such poets as Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Malczewski, and Goszczyński, as well as by a number of less outstanding authors. That Polish criticism recognizes the Byronic tale as a distinctive genre testifies to its crucial role in Polish literature. Secondly, the Byronic hero, proud, rebellious, passionate, egotistic, and tragically alienated, was the model for the early romantic protagonist, often reinterpreted in the context of Polish struggle for independence. Thirdly, mature Słowacki's drew inspiration for his *Podróż do Ziemi Świętej z Neapolu* and *Beniowski* on Byron's long narrative poems, *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan* respectively. For an overview of the Polish romantic reception of Byron see Treugutt. One may conclude, in a broad generalization, that Byronism – which itself can be treated as a species of the gothic – was in Polish literature what gothicism was in American literature: an alternative to the bright, hopeful Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment vision marked by epistemological optimism and confidence in human rationality and goodness.

Poe's Byronism is most conspicuous in his early poetry, particularly "Tamerlane" and "Al Aaraaf." Of the latter poem the young author wrote to John Allan that it "commences with a sonnet (illegitimate) a la mode de Byron in his prisoner of Chillon" (*Letters*, 1: 19). Silverman lists the following Byronic motifs in *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827): "the blend of ambition and the 'feminine'; the enveloping gloom, pride, and guilt; the picture of a soul damaged from birth and lost beyond redeeming" (*Mournful* 41). Poe's youthful fascination with Byron found expression in his self-image as a dejected young artist and in such emulative adolescent gestures as swimming six miles in the James River at Richmond, as the English poet had done in the Hellespont, and later spreading the rumor that he was going to Greece to fight for its independence (*Mournful* 24, 38, 41). In 1829, in a letter asking John Allan for money to support the publication of *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems*, Poe stresses his independence from Byron as a sign of his poetic maturity: "I would remark, in conclusion, that I have long given up *Byron* as a model – for which, I think, I deserve some credit" (*Letters*, 1: 20). Later, he returns to Byron in a 1844 plate article "Byron and Miss Chaworth." However, if the Byronic mode is distinguished by gloom, unredeemable despair, and the perverse impulse to self-destruction, then Poe clearly remains a Byronist in his tales of horror as well. For a discussion of "Metzengerstein" and "William Wilson" from this perspective, and for an overview of critical discussions

verse. His literary output is far smaller than that of a Byron, Shelley, or Keats – the other romantic poets who met an early death – yet *Maria* is distinguished by a finality which proleptically renders superfluous, if not impossible, any other statements by its author, and which is the reverse of Poe’s iteration of the same masterplot of loss, death, and despair.

Symptomatically, the two writers have had a similarly uneasy status in American and Polish literary studies. In *A Fable for Critics* (1848), James Russell Lowell characterized the author of “Ligeia” as “three fifths... genius and two fifths sheer fudge” (188); in Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941), written almost a century later, he is buried in a footnote as a writer whose “value... is now seen to consist in his influence rather than in the body of his own work,” and whose “stories... seem relatively factitious when contrasted with the moral depth of Hawthorne or Melville” (xii); in a similar vein, in Harold Bloom’s *Poetics of Influence* (1988) he is deemed hysterical and tasteless.² Malczewski’s accomplishment, unlike that of Poe, was quickly recognized by the best minds of his era, and his important position in Polish romantic literature was never questioned.³ However, the author of *Maria* is usually considered a literary outsider without a tangible genealogy or a historical context other than the so-called Ukrainian school of Polish poetry.⁴ While there exist excellent analyses of his idea of history, style, and point

of Byron’s influence on Poe, see Soule. Even Poe’s protagonists’ compulsion to confess can be at least partially traced to Byron’s narrative poems, where the hero’s dramatic deathbed confession is a way of explaining his mysterious past as well as of enhancing authenticity. (For example, the entire “Prisoner of Chillon,” which Poe mentions in his letter to Allan, is the protagonist’s confessional monologue.) This connection is usually overlooked by U.S. critics: Benfey, who pays much attention to the significance of confession in “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat” (36-38), never mentions Byron, perhaps because the English poet’s influence on American romanticism is not as pervasive as his impact on Polish literature of the period, and therefore is less self-evident.

Just as Poe, Malczewski shared the Englishman’s melancholy and his pessimistic view of human existence as absurd. The scant library he left on his death consisted of the complete works of Byron, *A Thousand and One Nights*, and a few other books in English and French. Byron’s contemporary – the English poet was born in 1788, five years before Malczewski, and his death in 1824 preceded Malczewski’s by two years – the Polish poet self-consciously follows in Byron’s footsteps. *Maria* is a Byronic tale in verse, which, like Byron’s poems, employs similarly discontinuous narration and uses a historical mask to speak of the romantic predicament of alienation, misplacement, and despair; it also features a Byronic hero who self-destructively violates moral norms in the name of his individual values. Last but not least, a passage from *The Corsair* serves as an epigraph to Canto II: “On Conrad’s stricken soul exhaustion prest, / And stupor almost lull’d it into rest,” and the author’s notes supplementing the text of *Maria* include a reference to *Childe Harold*: “Like to the apples on the Dead Sea’s shore, / All ashes to the taste” (n. 3). For more critical elaboration on Malczewski’s Byronism, see Przybylski, “Wstęp”; Dopart 26-29.

² For a concise overview of the critical reception of Poe, see Kennedy, “Violence” 533-34.

³ Responses to *Maria* by such Polish romantic writers as Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Krasiński, Mochnacki, Goszczyński, and Michał Grabowski are quoted in Gacowa 299-317.

⁴ Until the partitions of Poland, the Ukraine formed part of the Polish kingdom and had a large Polish population. The term “Ukrainian school,” coined by Aleksander Tyszyński in 1837, refers to Polish romantic poets who lived in the region and drew on its nature, culture, and folklore: Malczewski, Goszczyński, Józef

of view, Malczewski's otherness makes it difficult for critics to find a framework for a comprehensive interpretation of his work.⁵ Thus, Kennedy's observation that "[p]art of the difficulty of situating Poe within an American tradition derives from the obstinate fact that his writing resists assimilation into the broad interpretive paradigms constructed to define [American] literature during its so-called 'renaissance'" ("Violence" 534) might also be applied to Malczewski's place in Polish romanticism.

Arguably, one reason for this situation, is both writers' belatedness: Poe was a materialist in the era of spirit, an unwilling successor and fierce opponent of Transcendentalism, a latter-day American Byron who explored the impossibility of resurrecting the romantic ideals of love and beauty; Malczewski, a poet who in his youth had witnessed the shattering of hope for resurrecting independent Poland in 1812 and who made his appearance in the wake of Mickiewicz's immensely popular collection of verse *Ballads and Romances* (1822), which had determined the dominant voice of the early phase of Polish romanticism. Poe and Malczewski both tread on the detritus of romantic idealism, the scattered remains of Emerson's and Mickiewicz's "bright" epistemological projects. Their characters, irrevocably alienated from nature, are doomed to despair, hopelessly misplaced, deliberately or unwittingly spreading death and destruction. Roderick Usher and Egaeus, Montresor and William Wilson; the nameless narrators of "Ligeia," "The Black Cat," "The Imp of the Perverse," and "The Tell-Tale Heart"; as well as Malczewski's Voivode and Waclaw, all reenact what Michael Davitt Bell terms "a tale of compulsive self-murder... however elaborately the impulse may be displaced" (99).

Maria is set in the Ukraine in the 17th century, the period of Poland's greatest military glory and her victorious wars against the Turkish empire. Its plot draws on the Byronic tale of unhappy love and atrocious crime. The title heroine is married to Waclaw but his father, the Voivode, who disapproves of the union as a mesalliance, has enforced the couple's separation. Thus Maria still lives with her father, the Sword-Bearer, until the Voivode unexpectedly announces that he will accept Waclaw's wife on the condition that Waclaw leads a campaign against the Tatars in which the Sword-Bearer will also take part. The young couple hope to be reunited before long, yet when Waclaw and the

Bohdan Zaleski, and Maurycy Goslawski (Witkowska and Przybylski 567). The critical commonplace of Malczewski's isolated otherness has recently been challenged by Danuta Zawadzka, who convincingly approaches him as a member of the generation that witnessed the failure of Napoleon's Moscow campaign in 1812.

⁵ See Żmigrodzka for a comparison of Mickiewicz's *Ballads and Romances* and Malczewski's *Maria* as two alternative beginnings of Polish romanticism; Maciejewski, "Śmierci 'czarne w piersiach blizny'" for a reading of *Maria* as an expression of despair; Maciejewski, *Narodziny* (185-263) for an analysis of rhetoric, style, composition, and point of view in *Maria*; Zawadzka for a well-informed discussion of Malczewski's philosophy of history. For a sensitive and imaginative but sketchy reading of *Maria* in terms of loss and melancholia, see Bieńczyk.

Sword-Bearer are away fighting the Tatars, a group of strange characters in carnival masks arrive at the Sword-Bearer's mansion and drown Maria in a nearby pond. Waclaw comes back from his victorious campaign only to find his wife dead in her bedroom, and learns what happened from the mysterious stripling who witnessed the scene. He suspects his father of deception, mounts his horse, and, with the stripling behind his back, gallops away, probably to kill the Voivode. The Sword-Bearer soon dies of grief.

Except for the historical and geographical background, which Poe persistently omits from his stories, the key elements of his and Malczewski's plots are remarkably similar. Most conspicuously, *Maria* features the Poesque death of the beautiful woman, just as "Ligeia," "Berenice," "The Black Cat," "Morella," or "The Fall of the House of Usher." With the exception of the latter tale, which alludes to incest, Poe explores this theme in the implicitly sexual context of marriage, either extant or forthcoming, a circumstance unmentioned in his programmatic "Philosophy of Composition." Furthermore, the Voivode's treachery is reminiscent of Montresor's artful scheme to take revenge on Fortunato in "The Cask of Amontillado," and the two murderous impostures are further linked by the motif of the carnival mask, which Montresor uses to better disguise his intentions. In addition, the mask brings to mind "William Wilson," where the protagonist is also wearing a carnival costume when he kills his namesake. The ontologically ambiguous doubling of the two William Wilsons is in turn paralleled, at least to some extent, by the relation between Waclaw and the stripling who incites him to revenge. Finally, if we bracket the difference in motivation, Waclaw's intended patricide corresponds to the murder of the father by the narrators of "The Imp of the Perverse" and "The Tell-Tale Heart." Yet even more significant than those individual analogies is Poe's and Malczewski's shared melancholy sensitivity and the obsessive preoccupation with death and mourning which informs their narratives. Death is not so much an event as a state of mind and a state of the world. Poe's tales abound in examples of life in death: Berenice and Madeline Usher suffer from catalepsy; Madeline and Ligeia revive; Roderick Usher, William Wilson, and Montresor continue living despite being spiritually dead; M. Valdemar and Vankirk are suspended between life and death by a mesmeric experiment. In Malczewski, by contrast, it is not life which continues into death but death which intrudes into life: marks of death appear in the title heroine's face long before she is drowned; the memory of the dead poisons the minds of the living; a stripling, himself undead rather than alive, comes to the hero as a messenger of death. In both writers, however, the blurring of this fundamental ontological barrier between life and death reflects their melancholy predicament.

In her discussion of depressed narcissistic individuals, Kristeva proposes that "[their] sadness would point to a primitive self – wounded, incomplete, empty....

Their sadness would be... the most archaic expression of an unsymbolizable, unnameable narcissistic wound, so precocious that no outside agent (subject or agent) can be used as referent” (12). The depressed narcissist, says Kristeva, does not mourn an actual object but an archaic, unrepresentable Thing of which he or she is “knowingly disinherited” (13). Centered upon loss and absence, suffused with despair, Poe’s arabesques and *Maria* are expressions of this predicament in which mourning precedes bereavement and the wound that will not heal undercuts the boundary between self and world. The uncompleted work of mourning results in a heavy, overwhelming sadness, a unity of mood which counterbalances the fragmentation of Poe’s and Malczewski’s plots.

The opening sentences of “The House of Usher” epitomize the oppressive melancholy of the Poesque mode:

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was – but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit.... I looked upon the scene before me – upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain – upon the bleak walls – upon the vacant eye-like windows – upon a few rank sedges – and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees – with an utter depression of 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 everyday life – the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart – an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. (317)

While the appearance of the house corresponds to the condition of the Usher family, the narrator, susceptible to the poisonous influence of their malady, is instantly drawn into the sufferers’ circle; furthermore, he deems the oppressive gloom the natural state of the soul into which he has awakened from an opium dream. Overcome by decay, the house resembles a cadaver, and the narrator’s heart sickens as though he were looking at an unveiled human corpse. Yet the house, like its inhabitants, is curiously undead, suspended in the ambiguous, indeterminate, anguished state of melancholia. From the very first sentences – which, interestingly, seem to parody Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” passage, despair a sarcastic reversal of the Emersonian ecstasy on the

bare common⁶ – the narrator lapses into the melancholy, death-driven language of repetition and approximation in an attempt to communicate the emotional essence of his experience. This frame of mind seems to shape his perception of Roderick Usher: he describes Roderick’s radical change in appearance as “mere exaggeration of the prevailing character of [his facial] features” (321), yet, at least at the level of language, there is hardly any difference between the former “cadaverousness of complexion” with “an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison,” and the present “ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye” (321). But whether the deterioration is the narrator’s projection or whether, caused by the all-devouring wound, it resists symbolization even by another party, Roderick, just as his house, is not alive but undead, and communicates his confinement in melancholy asymbolia by the only accessible, nonverbal means – his unnerving abstract art. The narrator, for his part, tries to avoid what Kennedy terms the contagion of death (*Poe, Death*) through the shelter of language, constructing a verbose narrative which, nonetheless, is inevitably poisoned by melancholia.

The setting of *Maria* is the vast expanse of the Ukrainian steppe traversed by the mounted Cossack, a messenger of the Voivode carrying the news of his ostensible change of mind:

Into the empty wilderness the desert-king darts off –
The steppe – horse – Cossack – darkness – are all one wild soul.
Ah! Who is going to restrain his freedom there?
He’s gone – no one will catch him in his native steppe. (Canto I, iii)⁷

The Cossack’s swift flight only momentarily breaks the unbearable melancholy stillness of nature. Malczewski’s oft-quoted description of the empty steppe corresponds to

⁶ Just as Emerson in *Nature*, Poe’s narrator experiences his negative revelation in the evening under a sky full of clouds; his passing through “a dreary tract of country” parallels Emerson’s “crossing a bare common”; and his sudden “sense of insufferable gloom” corresponds to Emerson’s unmotivated “perfect exhilaration.”

⁷ There exist several English translations of extracts from *Maria*, including one by August Antoni Jakubowski, Malczewski’s natural son, who died in the United States. Arthur and Marion Coleman ventured to translate the entire poem (1935), but their translation is unsuccessful. Since in terms of language and style *Maria* stands between the neoclassical and romantic traditions, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English poetry would provide viable models of language (e.g., Byron’s tales in verse and Pope’s translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) and of versification (e.g., the blank verse of Wordsworth and Browning, which would be a more felicitous model for a twentieth-century translation than Byron’s rhyming verse). Instead of turning to English poetry, however, the translators aimed to reproduce in English the prosodic features of the Polish original, retaining its rhyme scheme with full rhymes and using approximate syllabic meter with twelve to fourteen syllables to a line as an equivalent of the original’s thirteen-syllable line. The resulting English version, rendered in manneristic language, sounds extremely unnatural and certainly does not do justice to the original. I therefore quote passages from *Maria* in my literal translation, which sometimes draws on that of the Colemans.

Poe's portrayal of the House of Usher as another quintessential expression of the despair pervading the world of the tale:

The gaze wanders in space, yet, go where it may,
It meets no movement and cannot find rest.
.....
And silence – only in the air there's some unease.
How is it? Will the thought of the past not find
In this land one monument to the forefathers
Where it could leave the burden of its longing?
No – unless, winding downward, it dives into the ground:
There it will find old armor, all covered in rust,
And the bones that belong no one knows to whom;
There it will find rich grain in fertile ashes
Or worms breeding in newly dead bodies;
But in the fields it only wanders without rest –
Like Despair – without home – without aim – without end. (I, viii)

Whereas Malczewski also stresses sight as an instrument of melancholy perception, seeing in *Maria* is without agent or focus. Immanent in the steppe, the gaze belongs to no one, has no source and no target; abstract and impossible, it is there only to see nothing. The still emptiness, uninterrupted by any objects which could attract or arrest the gaze, offers no relief but sustained unease. Likewise, the thought of the past restlessly haunting the steppe cannot settle on any symbolic representation of the nation's heroic history, a monument which, as an expression of collective memory and object of veneration, would free the minds of the living from the besetting presence of the dead whose anonymous remains or still rotting bodies lie buried in the ground. In contrast to Poe's story, where the deterioration of the Usher siblings is exteriorized in the cadaverous appearance of the sentient house, in *Maria* the decay underlying the boundless void of the steppe is repressed, hidden from sight, and thus all the more inescapable. Melancholy asymbolia, Roderick's condition in "The House of Usher," becomes in Malczewski a universal predicament which encompasses nature and national history and makes impossible the reconciliation of the living with the dead.

Thus, the sole articulation, or rather, vocalization of despair reverberating in the steppe is the sad murmur of the wind and the uncanny "sighs from graves and from beneath the grass the groans / Of those who sleep on withered wreaths of their old fame" (I, ii), incoherent symptoms of the repressed bursting through the barrier of the national

unconscious, and in this respect a counterpart of the “low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound” (333) coming from the basement vault where Madeline Usher is entombed. The wild rhapsody made up by the signs and groans of the dead is referred to as “Mad music, madder still the words of the song / Which the Spirit of old Poland saves for posterity” (I, ii). This formulation, in turn, brings to mind Roderick’s guitar performances: the “singular perversion and amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber” (324) or the “wild fantasias” which combine eccentric music with “rhymed verbal improvisations” (325).⁸ Since music, in contrast to language, is essentially asymbolic, it is a viable mode for communicating melancholia. Like the tone of voice in depressed patients, it is a direct expression of loss, which words inevitably fail to convey. As Kristeva proposes, “[t]he arbitrary sequence perceived by depressive persons as absurd is coextensive with a loss of reference. The depressed speak of nothing, they have nothing to speak of: glued to the Thing... they are without objects” (51).

As the shattering of meaning, melancholia is always a form of negativity. The negativity of *Maria* seems even more radical than that of a Poe tale as it extends to the construction of the world of the poem, which is described in terms of absence and lack, of that which is *not* there. Besides, while in “The House of Usher” or “Ligeia” it is the protagonist who is sunk in mourning even prior to bereavement, in *Maria* the experience of loss is not associated with any particular subject. Rather, from the very beginning of Malczewski’s tale the whole universe suffers from melancholia, which in Canto II is personified in the nameless stripling. For unlike Poe, who always mourns a personal loss,⁹ Malczewski superimposes on his personal bereavement, symbolically expressed through Maria’s death, his country’s loss of independence and his generation’s loss of hope for winning it back after the crushing defeat of Napoleon’s army in the Moscow campaign of 1812. Thus, first and foremost, the Polish poet mourns a historical and national loss, and in mourning it he goes back in history to the time when Poland was still an independent country and a European military power. The seventeenth-century universe of *Maria* is thus proleptically marked by the loss Malczewski witnessed during his lifetime.¹⁰ This accounts for the paradoxical nature of *Maria*’s narrative conscious-

⁸ For a different perspective on Roderick’s poetry, music, and painting, discussed as an attempt at pure art and negation of the palpable world, see Kaplan 54-57.

⁹ Silverman convincingly argues that the underlying theme of Poe’s writings is his childhood bereavement of the mother and his unconscious denial of her death (*Mournful* 76-77). A similar argument is made by Kennedy (“Poe, ‘Ligeia’” 117-18).

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion of the ostensible cleavage between the time of action and time of narration and of their actual identity, see Zawadzka, 240-41. The critic objects that the mention of graves and freshly

ness, represented in Canto I by the disembodied sight and in Canto II by the uncanny stripping; irrevocably enmeshed in history, yet curiously free from temporal bonds, as if suspended in the timelessness of melancholia defined solely as the aftermath of loss.

The scene of writing in Poe's tales can be even more problematic as the reader must situate the first-person narrators in some physical time and space where they could pen their stories. As Kennedy observes in his discussion of "Ligeia," "the scene of writing remains unspecified and almost unimaginable, for the hysterical conclusion seems to preclude the possibility of future composition. We must assume, as we do in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' that the narrator somehow escapes the horrific final scene to inscribe his tale" (Poe, *Death* 33). But whereas Kennedy seems to concede that the evident contradiction between the narrator's breakdown and his subsequent act of storytelling results primarily from narrative convention, it might be more fruitful to treat the narrative as the protagonist's retrospective reenactment of the events, which is ineluctably a construction by the subject deeply sunk in mourning.¹¹ That the narrator commences the story *after* all the events have taken place can account for his idealization of Ligeia as the absolute, impossible object of desire, an object that is not lost in the course of the narrative but is a *lost* one from its very beginning. The narrator does not simply recollect his experiences but lives them again: "what marvel that I shudder while I write?" (276), and the urge to confess that he shares with Poe's other narrator-protagonists is not so much an urge to unbury the secret – the effect of the tales on the tellers is not therapeutic but destructive, and the repressed returns against their conscious will – but to fill with words the void created by loss. This perspective also helps solve the problem posed by Kennedy: the conclusion, hysterical as it is, emerges in the telling, and it is this bizarre climax of the tale as told, and the experience as *re-lived*, that marks the narrator's collapse into the incommunicable otherness of madness or death. "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!'" (277). The present tense and direct speech mark the obliteration of distance between the moment of the original experience and that of writing; as they merge into one, the narrator is crushed by horror, which replaces his sheltering melancholy sadness.¹²

dead bodies before the battle is not a mark of nineteenth-century consciousness but a comment about Polish history, "where old graves generate new ones" (240).

¹¹ Elizabeth Bronfen argues along these lines in her discussion of "Ligeia": "[The narrator's] act of textual representation as recollection is clearly marked as an attempt to deny the absence of his beloved, as this gesture emerges precisely from an acknowledgement of his loss" (330).

¹² A similar process can be observed in "The Tell-Tale Heart": "'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (559).

Kristeva's observations about melancholia can elucidate the inconsistencies, lacunae, and discontinuities in Poe's and Malczewski's plots. Madeline Usher escapes from the fortified vault; Egaeus removes Berenice's teeth while sleepwalking; the narrator of *Ligeia* does not know how he met his beloved wife; in *Maria*, it is impossible to explain away the masks' appearance or the role of the stripling. As Kristeva argues, "From the analyst's [or reader's – MZ] point of view, the possibility of concatenating signifiers (words or actions) appears to depend upon going through mourning for an archaic and indispensable object" (40). If every narrative strives for wholeness and coherence as the text expresses and explains itself to the reader, then the fissures, blanks, and concealments in Poe's tales and Malczewski's *Maria* betray an incomplete, impossible mourning of a fundamental loss. The texts, like speech, emerge from an unhealed wound, produced by a bad, unapproachable past buried in a crypt, as Madeline is buried in the basement vault or the warriors' bodies in Malczewski's Ukrainian wilderness:

in the vast fields heavy silence lies;
Neither merry noblemen's, nor knights' voices can be heard,
Only the wind murmurs sadly, bending down the grain;
Only the sighs from graves and from beneath the grass the groans
Of those who sleep on the withered wreaths of their old fame. (I, ii)

Located at the level of the national historical unconscious, the crypt in *Maria* holds the nameless national heroes whose deaths poison the present with despair, since they transfer to the sons, as if by contagion, the obligation to continue the pointless heroic struggle whose only outcome is death for its own sake. The oppressive emptiness of Malczewski's steppe corresponds to the cramped interiors in Poe's stories: the one claustrophobic, the other agoraphobic, both are projections of human events, and neither offers an escape. Just as Poe's enclosures are composed of Gothic and romantic props, artificial, unbelievable objects which provide a stage set for the strange events, like Roderick Usher's room or the bridal chamber in "Ligeia," Malczewski's open spaces have no meaning in themselves; his indifferent, death-poisoned nature is but an allegory of history and its destructiveness, while his preoccupation with the bloody and vainly heroic Polish history parallels Poe's entanglement in the repressed, unspeakable family past.

In "The House of Usher," repression is, so to say, a joint effort by Roderick and the narrator, as his relation of the circumstances of Madeline's burial makes clear:

At the request of Usher I personally aided him in the arrangements for the temporary entombment. The body having been encoffined, we two alone bore it to its rest. The vault in which we placed it... was small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light; lying, at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my own sleeping apartment.... Having deposited our mournful burden upon tressels within this region of horror, we partially turned aside the yet unscrewed lid of the coffin, and looked upon the face of the tenant.... Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead – for we could not regard her unawed.... We replaced and screwed down the lid, and, having secured the door of iron, made our way, with toil, into the scarcely less gloomy apartments of the upper portion of the house. (329)

Of significance here is not only the fact that the narrator participates in Madeline's premature entombment but also his own relationship to the woman. The location of the vault directly under his bedroom, which he refers to as "sleeping apartment," indicates its status as the representation of his own unconscious, which normally finds expression in dreams, during sleep. The shift from the first person singular ("I aided him") through emphasis on his intimate bond with Roderick created by sharing the secret and the guilt ("we two alone bore it to its rest") to the first person plural reflects the narrator's increasing identification with Roderick as he begins to share Usher's feigned bereavement, his forbidden desires, and his effort to repress them. The awe they both feel at the sight of Madeline's body is caused by her physical beauty: "the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death" (329). The coffin has not obliterated Madeline's sexuality, which continues to arouse desire, now even more terrifying because necrophiliac and therefore immediately repressed. Her return exposes the futility and self-destructiveness of this effort, but whereas Roderick is finally reunited with his lost object in death, the narrator remains afflicted with loss and impossible desire.

Reminiscent of Poe's obsession with dying women, Malczewski's version of the romantic ideal of female beauty also relies on the inseparable connection between female sexuality and death. Dressed in mourning, Maria is described in terms of lifelessness, disease, and decay:

downcast black eyes and a black mourning gown
and in her face – sorrow that bends down her head ...
and if suddenly, amidst the thick shadows
some thought or memory flushes her cheek

it is with such dull, pale light as when the full moon
fills a statue's features with a strange life. (I, x)

The image of a statue, which brings to mind Poe's poem "To Helen" (1831), here alludes to tombstone representations of female figures in mourning: like statues momentarily enlivened by moonlight – the latter a stock element of Gothic scenery but also Hawthorne's emblem of the romancer's art freeing objects from their ordinary referentiality – Maria is endowed with a strange, sickly beauty which hides a void, the dry heart of one who is spiritually dead.

She spoke – and as in still and rotten water
Dregs suddenly stirred rise from the bottom,
From her heart rose feelings that have long been absorbing tears
And cloaked her paleness with a greenish shade. (I, xii)

Maria's sickly appearance, bordering on the abject, prefigures her death. An object of desire throughout the poem – she and Waclaw are referred to as "lovers" rather than as husband and wife – she resembles the women in Poe's tales who fall ill and begin to hold a morbid fascination for the narrators. Before her entombment, Madeline Usher's spectral presence haunts the house as well as the protagonists' minds, but her ostensible death fully reveals her alluring carnality. Egaeus says of Berenice, "During the brightest days of her unparalleled beauty, most surely I had never loved her" (229). Her illness does not arouse his love but disturbs his indifference: "[Now] The forehead was high, and very pale, and singularly placid; and the once jetty hair fell partially over it, and overshadowed the hollow temples with innumerable ringlets now of a vivid yellow.... The eyes were lifeless, and lustreless, and seemingly pupil-less, and I shrank involuntarily from their glassy stare to the contemplation of the thin and shrunken lips." (229-30). Berenice's eyes offer a glimpse into the void, but it is his fixation on the teeth between the "thin and shrunken lips" that draws Egaeus to spiritual self-destruction.

Finding no one to answer the door when he is back from battle, Waclaw, overcome by longing and desire, violates the privacy of Maria's bedroom entering it through the window. This act is construed as transgressive not only for reasons of social decorum. For if the house represents not only the space of the mind but also feminine space, the open window leading into the dark interior resembles the most mysterious female orifice. Waclaw's entry thus symbolizes penetration of the female body and proleptically becomes the acting out of a necrophiliac fantasy, as the erotically charged description of dead Maria suggests:

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a moon ray

Whose flickering light falls on the gloomy figure,
Casts such a wild tenderness in her squinted eyes
As a succubus has when she sees a lover.

.....
In what terrible movements her body is breaking!
Not with the graceful lightness that is not a burden
But with the weight of freshly fallen ruins,
Limp arms, the head hung down, legs already stiff
Make her an awful object, still dear to him. (II, xvi)

Like Ligeia, who returns to kill Rowena, dead Maria becomes a demon in Waclaw's eyes, a vampiric lover whose embrace poisons his mind with perverse desire.

Arguably, while in Poe the female characters must die because their sensual carnality constitutes a menace to his narrators, and the life force of Eros they represent threatens to break the Thanatotic unity of the melancholy mood, in Malczewski it is the dead world which poisons, absorbs, and destroys the living woman. Yet the death of a woman is also necessary to Poe's and Malczewski's narrative economy because it actualizes the intangible, primitive loss of melancholia which governs their worlds. Roderick feigns Madeline's death just to suffer the loss; Maria's death, like that of Ligeia, fills the unbearable void with specific, object-related pain.

According to Kristeva, depressed persons

nostalgically fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose, to which they remain painfully riveted. The *denial* (*Verleugnung*) of negation would thus be the exercise of an impossible mourning, the setting up of a fundamental sadness and an artificial, unbelievable language, cut out of the painful background that is not accessible to any signifier and that intonation alone, intermittently, succeeds in inflecting. (43-44)

Driven by impossible mourning, Poe's and Malczewski's texts of melancholia also use a language that is artificial, hyperbolic, tormented and stiff, its sensationalism verging on the ridiculous, as in the description of Egaeus' blood-stained garments or Maria's dead body. Discontinuous, it replaces markers of syntactic relations with dashes; it has a preference for very long sentences, perhaps postponing closure because of the association of the latter with death, which is both longed for and feared. Overwrought, inverse, and repetitive, it fails to communicate the original loss. Bell rightly observes that "The Poe

reader, whatever meanings he may find in the language of the tales, must first confront that language itself: a language – including the symbolic discourse of image, character, and plot – apparently drained of significant relation [to the known world]” (103).

The effect of artificiality is heightened by allegory, which in both writers functions as a shield against the immediacy of experience. *Maria* is fraught with allegorical personifications: Pride and Hope, Loneliness and Despair, Virtue and Deception, even Breeze and Dew. Poe’s allegories work in the opposite direction as rather than personify abstract concepts he endows living creatures and natural objects with abstract meanings. However, they serve a similar purpose: that of introducing distance, a barrier of indeterminacy and artifice. Thus, the black cat becomes an allegory of reason; Ligeia, the Lady Philosophia, an allegory of wisdom and knowledge; Rowena’s bridal chamber, an allegory of the narrator’s diseased mind; William Wilson’s double, an allegory of conscience; Fortunato, an allegory of guilt. By recourse to convention, allegory prevents direct, unpredictable and therefore threatening contact with real-life persons of flesh and blood. According to David Leverenz, sensationalism serves a similar purpose.¹³ Immediate contact which involves affection is unbearable in a world infected by death, a world which reflects the unredeemable meaninglessness of human life and cherishes its overwhelming vacuity, sadness, and melancholy prostration.

Significantly, the only actions that take place in Poe’s and Malczewski’s works are acts of destruction: the Voivode’s deception of his son; the heroic but futile bloodshed of Waclaw and the Sword-Bearer’s fight against the Tatars; the Tatars’ burning down of a Ukrainian village; the masks’ murder of Maria. The actions and events in Poe are of similar character: the stagnation in his worlds is shaken only by fatal illness, death, and murder. Prostration finally leads to absolute stasis, the stasis of death in life. Expectedly enough, Poe’s tales often end with the image of the tomb: “Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. *In pace requiescat!*” (854). “But she died; and with my own hands I bore her to the tomb; and I laughed with a long and bitter laugh as I found no traces of the first, in the charnel where I laid the second – Morella” (239). The last words of the narrator fleeing after Roderick and Madeleine’s death are, “the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘*House of Usher*’” (336), another version of the grave burying the remains of the house and the family. In a similar vein, the final lines of *Maria* read,

¹³ “Sensation in Poe becomes a male defense against the danger of sentiment.... [It] becomes a narcissistic way of feeling real, by magnifying the mind-body split while reducing intimate relations – with the wife in “The Black Cat,” the father in “Imp of the Perverse” – to nobodyhood” (Leverenz 120-21).

It's quiet – where three graves stand in a mournful team,
It's empty – sad – it's wistful in the lush Ukraine.

The grave signifies the finality of death and the silencing of the tale, as well as reinforcing the loss which pervades the whole narrative.¹⁴ At the same time, however, it serves another, more perverse function. As the actual or figural death of characters at the end of the tale terminates mourning, it threatens to discontinue the worship of the all-demanding Thing. With the final image of the grave, Poe's and Malczewski's texts of melancholia seem to appeal to the reader to perpetuate their impossible work of mourning. In an attempt to spread the contagion of loss, as it was spread to the narrator of "The House of Usher," they strive to secure a lasting triumph of the unattainable Thing which governs their worlds.

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¹⁴ Kennedy approaches this image differently and speaks of "Poe's representation of the tomb as an object of both repression and fixation," adding that it "curiously anticipates the theory of 'cryptonymy' elaborated by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in their... study of Freud's Wolf-Man" (*Poe, Death* 72).

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