American Literary-Political Engagements

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For Claire

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INTRODUCTION

AESTHETIC JUDGMENTS

> "It's an aesthetic judgement as much as anything," he explained, looking up. "Partly a moral one, of course."
>
> "Of course, said Smiley politely.

At the conclusion of John Le Carré's 1974 espionage thriller *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* the captured mole Haydon tells spy hunter George Smiley that he made the political decision to turn traitor to England for reasons that were largely "aesthetic" (403). In the nineteenth-century, United States authors often engaged the politics of their times through literature as they conceptualized political issues in literary terms. Concerns over Jacksonian democracy, social reform in a rapidly industrializing American economy, African-American familial cooperation in the post-Civil War era, changing conceptions of culpability with respect to the law, and marginalized individuals' involvement in political agitation near the close of the century were made the central subjects of diverse literary works which, though not often characterized as overtly "political," nevertheless made these political concerns "as much as anything" a matter of, and for, literary art. The texts worked to narrate, and thereby negotiate, contemporary political conflicts and challenges under the assumption that, as Jean Pfaelzer has observed with respect to Rebecca Harding Davis' Civil War fiction, "The aesthetic self is never separate from the economic and public self" (216). In considering politics from a literary perspective, however, these texts often figured politics in seemingly nonpolitical forms, as aesthetic judgments, interpersonal strife, perceptions of the body, alterations of characters' consciousness, or rhetorical negotiations, approaches which can just as often suppress (at least on the surface) as illuminate the nature of a particular political issue in nineteenth-century America, as a given author envisioned it.

Discussing themes that necessarily involve the intersection of the real and the imaginative, the lived experience and the artistically constructed literary work, demands we employ a critical eye to examining these convergences while attending to the operations of history, contemporary

events, and the processes of textual composition. We must also cautiously explore how an author engages politics through literary means that refer to, while imaginatively constituting, political and historical realities, under the assumption that politics and history are contexts that both determine and are determined by the author engaging them. As John Carlos Rowe has noted from a consideration of the work of Frederic Jameson and Mark Seltzer, "representational strategies of political and literary sorts inevitably share powerful contemporary social values and predispositions" that must be considered in historical context in order to be fully understood (*Theoretical* 161).

We might turn to another twentieth-century novel about international politics to further introduce the concepts underlying the engagement of politics by nineteenth-century American literature that I will examine in this book. In Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1995) the protagonist (Philip Roth himself) exclaims in a moment of exasperation while sitting in a Ramallah military courtroom with his Arab companion George Ziad: "Please, no metaphors where there is recorded history!" (129). His resistance at this point in the novel is directed at figurative expression strategically employed to imply a connection between the culpability of Nazi Germans in their commission of atrocities and the culpability of Israeli soldiers in their treatment of Arab protestors. Roth perceives that connection to be both false, as it is merely an aesthetic construction, and deployed by a politically devious speaker. At the same time, in the novel as a whole Roth remains profoundly aware that personal identity as well as politics are deeply and inescapably embedded within the construction of public sound-bites and the conscious as well as the unconscious performing of individual roles within national as well as personal contexts in a world dominated by the dissemination of mass-media images. Metaphors may be politically destructive in that they may advance falsehoods for easy public consumption, but they may also be politically constructive, enabling an individual as well as an author to create political visions and political commentary to serve as alternatives to existing political orders and rhetorical constructions, constituting an aesthetic response of sufficient complexity to match that of these orders and their social and personal effects. Roth offers instances of such responses in the novel at moments when the protagonist Philip constructs literary narratives to understand and explicate political events; for example, Philip portrays himself as reconstructing his friend George Ziad's enraged diatribes against Israeli Jews in the form of a chronological and consistent narrative, a summarized reconstruction he says is far more "coherent" for the very fact of its being summarized by the observing,

experienced literary artist than George's original clumsy rantings while at the same time Roth's reconstruction itself constitutes a critique of Ziad's politics as profoundly antisemitic and historically distorted through its choices of narrative emphases.

> "I assure you that Arafat can differentiate between Woody Allen and Philip Roth." This was surely the strangest sentence I had ever heard spoken in my life.

In what are, to my mind, the funniest lines in *Operation Shylock*, Roth illustrates that the engagement of literature with politics produces odd and unexpected statements (141). When the nineteenth-century American authors considered in the present study attempted to address contemporary political concerns in and through literature, they turned to literary means to do so which often ran counter to prevailing literary tastes, fostered the development of new modes of literary expression, and employed unusual approaches to authorship. While all of the works I discuss are either written by "canonical" authors (Poe, Howells, James) or written in "canonical" genres (the slave narrative, the realist novel), they have nevertheless been viewed—both in their own times and by present-day scholars—as oddities in an individual author's corpus or genre, as carrying lesser or uncertain significance for literary history, or as being of secondary literary merit. Edgar Allan Poe's comedic short fiction, especially the early comedic sketches of the 1830s "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and "A Predicament," has garnered far less popular or scholarly attention than his other work. One scholar has assessed that "in spite of a more widespread recognition of the presence of humor in his work, there is a tendency not to regard Poe as a humorous writer" (Stauffer 4) while another has concisely asserted "Poe suffers from a humor gap" as "part of a larger tendency by critics to avoid discussing humor" in his work (Tomlinson 186).[1] Rebecca Harding Davis' novella *Life in the Iron Mills* is now widely taught, and rightfully so, in American literature courses as a pioneering work of American realism, but her later novel *Margret Howth*, panned by Henry James himself in an early review, is far less frequently made an object of study by scholars and students. Carolyn L. Karcher includes *Margret Howth* as one instance of an important novel by a nineteenth-century American woman that has been "relegated to the margins of literary history" though, and Karcher suggests because, authors

[1] Interestingly, neither Stauffer nor Tomlinson choose to examine Poe's "How to Write a Blackwood Article" or "A Predicament" as part of their considerations of his comedic body of work.

like Davis "produced...intellectually serious, politically radical, and artistically innovative prose" (782). Few people would name Mattie Jackson's short slave narrative as a fine or significant example of this literary mode; as of the publication date of the present study, the full text of her narrative is only readily available as part of a relatively expensive anthology or online through the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's digital publishing initiative, "Documenting the American South." William Dean Howells' *A Modern Instance* and Henry James' *The Princess Casamassima,* though certainly far more respected by scholars and more widely read than any of the previously mentioned texts, nonetheless find themselves typically relegated to a secondary place relative to more "major" works by these authors (despite Howells' own evaluation that *A Modern Instance* was his best novel). In all of these cases, perceived problems with such literary elements as style, execution, choice of subject matter, and genre have led to these texts being understood as "strange," as have their foregrounding of gender, race, and disability as categories of identity which are central to the political projects of the texts themselves but which often disrupt conventional views of politics, literature, and physicality in nineteenth-century American literary art.

I would suggest that another crucial factor making these texts appear odd, and perhaps inferior, in comparison to other works by the same authors or in the same genres are the reciprocal determinations between literature and politics at their core. One common criticism leveled against the literary quality of *The Princess Casamassima*, for instance, claims the novel is ultimately fractured and flawed because James intends the text as a political novel but ultimately sacrifices politics to a typically Jamesian concern with realist/naturalist/modernist modes of representation and experimentation with formal literary elements. Thus, the concluding plot element of Hyacinth's suicide reflects James' inability to handle this tension, as Hyacinth chooses to take his own life rather than to participate in a violent revolutionary act. Our reading of James' novel and the other texts I discuss need not, however, reject politics in favor of literature or vice-versa. In attempting to engage political issues and concerns of their times, and in understanding the political from a literary perspective, these authors found their literary work itself transformed. Even though the resulting literary products may at times admittedly be flawed and confused, they also become thrillingly original and advance convictions that may still challenge our conceptions of nineteenth-century American literature and political issues today. In the following chapters, I consider negotiations of this sort as they operated with respect to the engagement of

political concerns by literary artists in the United States from the 1830s to the 1880s. To do so with respect to the diverse literary productions and issues of this period, a variety of critical perspectives—such as scholarly approaches to textual production, gender studies, Disability Studies, and legal history—must be employed.

The first chapter of this study focuses on Edgar Allan Poe's comedic short fiction and its attempts to combat what he considered extravagant and vulgar images of the body in the popular culture of his day. Literary productions did not generate this chaos alone; the rise of Jacksonian democracy and fears of rule by a "Mobocracy" in the United States of the 1830s and 1840s contributed to the cultural pressures shaping Poe's normalizing response to American bodies and their literary representations. The tales "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and "A Predicament," in particular, operate as representations of a conservative political view which, despite their highly imaginative content and linguistic sophistication, ultimately present a rigid, coherent vision of the normal corporeal body. Figuring deviations from this vision as ridiculously abnormal—and thus as simultaneously aesthetically tasteless and politically dangerous—Poe's "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and "A Predicament" aim to defuse the threat of the images of chaotic bodies he encountered in antebellum America. In a similar vein, the comic sketches by Poe's contemporary Augustus Baldwin Longstreet differentiate between educated first-person narrators and the vulgar masses these narrators encounter within the genre of crude frontier storytelling to mock such narrative modes and advance conservative social critiques against the common rabble to which the rise of Jacksonian democracy in this period claimed to offer increasing political power and prestige.

In the second chapter I examine a literary attempt at a political engagement largely, though not entirely, antithetical to that of Poe and Longstreet. In her proto-realist novel *Margret Howth: A Story of To-day* (1862) Rebecca Harding Davis considers the subjects of the individual's place in the expanding industrial, capitalist economy of the mid-century United States, social reform, and the meaning of production in the lives of diverse Americans. The middle-class, self-sacrificing Margret, the selfish individualist Stephen Holmes who must evolve into a more enlightened, socially conscious person, and the rough but intensely ethical and democratic Dr. Knowles are characters who intersect to form an intricate commentary on the damages an unchecked capitalist ideology can wreck on the soul and body as well as the confused, frustrated attempts individuals in Davis' time made to combat such problems. In this chapter my consideration of *Margret Howth* focuses on Davis' construction of the

character of Lois Yare—a "helplessly crippled," mixed-racial young woman—who works as an independent peddler to make a living for herself amidst these broader socio-economic concerns. Examining this character from the perspective of Disability Studies, we can better understand how Davis' character is an extraordinary composition of conventional treatments of the sentimentalized cripple and the paternal nature of capitalist industry while at the same time she operates within the text as a profound critique of the nature and value of individual productivity, as defined by the economic institutions depicted in the novel. She also offers us insight into Davis' own uncertain attempts to work within a realistic literary mode to advance sociopolitical critiques.

While many critics have imagined Lois as "a powerless victim," Davis both reinforces and complicates this assessment to a profound degree; she depicts Lois as "alive with honest work" in contrast to physically normal but "flaccid" characters whose productivity and usefulness for their society the novel continually calls into question. Both economically productive and devalued by her society, morally transcendent and an object of pity, virtuous and powerless, Lois Yare reveals crucial ambivalences of Davis' own understandings of race, physical abilities, and meaningful productivity in the rapidly industrializing world of the Civil War-era United States. I thus also examine how Davis' struggle to reconcile broad social reform with an ethic of individualistic spiritual growth is registered in this character. While other major characters in the novel, such as Margret and Stephen, work to escape the prisons of mass industrialism and heartless capitalist ideology by rejecting whatever is "nerveless or sickly," "puny," or "crippled" in favor of "strengthened" souls and bodies and "vigorous frame[s]," this call for self-development clearly excludes the physically disabled Lois who simultaneously stands, throughout the novel, as a figure of self-reliant productivity and moral clarity.

Though lesser-known than other African-American women's slave narratives—like those of Harriet Jacobs, Mary Prince, or Ellen Craft—Mattie Jackson's 1866 *Story of Mattie J. Jackson* is noteworthy for its complex study of the intersection of African-American women's domestic labor and the author's intellectual work, as well as the creative work of the slave narrator and her amanuensis. In the third chapter of this study, I turn to Jackson's unique narrative to examine how it unites the slave woman (in the figure of her mother), the slave narrator (in the figure of Mattie herself), and the professional free black woman (in the figure of her stepmother who assisted in the composition of the narrative) in a network of labor that not only contributes to her own self-actualization but also

emphasizes the empowering nature of African-American familial cooperation while critiquing the patriarchal ideology of the slave system and the postwar nation. In the intricate dynamics of Jackson's narrative, her mother directly challenges the authority of the slaveholder by physically resisting him and by taking advantage of her unique position as a domestic servant to expose his embarrassing weaknesses so as to assault his pretensions to masculine strength and racial dominance. In turn, Jackson—with the encouragement and assistance of her well-educated stepmother amanuensis—celebrates her mother's resistance in the public forum of the published slave narrative which testifies to the "natural talent and genius" of African-American women while providing Jackson herself with a means of earning funds to gain a formal education. Furthermore, Jackson's approach as an author differs strikingly from that adopted by many African-American male authors in her simultaneous assertion of the value of slave women's work alongside the value of the intellectual labors of free black women and her recognition that, for enslaved as well as post-emancipation African-American women, these values could often be best attained through cooperative efforts among family members. In doing so, Jackson offers a vision of validation through work that suggests African-American women's personal development is ineluctably tied to their families and their families' histories of women's labor.

Jackson's text was published at the dawn of the postbellum era, an era in which the Federal government wrestled with unprecedented challenges related to Reconstruction, African-American citizenship and civil rights, expansion of American business, and significant developments in the legal system of the United States. By the 1880s, concerns over the attribution, and the limitations, of political, legal, and personal "responsibility," particularly with respect to the law, were so pervasive that they were adopted as the central issue in William Dean Howells' realist novel *A Modern Instance* (1882). In the fourth chapter of this book I examine how, throughout this novel, Howells presents a multiplicity of views on the subject of act versus intent as a means of judging individual responsibility, an issue one of Howells' contemporaries, the future Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., also addressed in his study *The Common Law* (1881). By comparing these two texts, we can discern that Howells' *A Modern Instance* provides the reader with a range of arguments regarding act versus intent as a basis for judging culpability. Ultimately, Howells' novel asserts that the reality of consequences should be privileged over judgments of fault. Harmful consequences are often uncontrollable and irrevocable, and regardless of an individual's active role in events or an individual's intentions, all members of American society, in Howells'

view, are responsible for dealing with results that involve the suffering of fellow human beings. Amidst contemporary political, legal, and economic trends to limit culpability, Howells' novel actually expands the scope of human moral responsibility, thus offering a powerful response to the laissez-faire politics of the Gilded Age.

While each of the first four chapters of this study attempts to offer a reading of literary engagements with political concerns in a specific text (or in the case of Poe, a complementary pair of texts) in order to develop relatively comprehensive interpretations of that text, I make no attempt to do so in the final chapter, as I turn to one of Henry James' longest novels. Instead, I follow just one highly intriguing thread to contend that James' most overtly political novel—*The Princess Casamassima* (1886)—is politically and culturally provocative not only because its subject matter concerns anarchism and class conflict but also because it attributes a subversive disability consciousness to its protagonist, Hyacinth Robinson. Though this politically astute and socially critical consciousness is at times subtle and cannot be described as resembling a twenty-first century model of disability, it does have striking parallels with more overt expressions of disability politics of the early twentieth century, such as the disabled writer and socialist Randolph Bourne's essay "The Handicapped" (1911). Significantly and visibly disabled himself, Bourne reflects on the socially constituted position of the physically disabled individual in a manner strikingly similar to James' in *The Princess Casamassima*. In James' preface to the New York edition of the novel, he contends the idea for Hyacinth emerged when he envisioned seeing all London "only from outside" and "with every door of approach shut" (1087). In Bourne's extraordinary essay, he announces that "The doors of the deformed man are always locked, and the key is on the outside" (75). What James constructs in his novel is not a lamentation for the downtrodden but a politically and socially critical disability perspective of the sort exhibited in Bourne's essay. The short-statured Hyacinth Robinson—considered by those in his world to be physically, economically, and familially disadvantaged—speaks from what James terms a position of "exclusion." Yet it is this position that grants him the capacity to "know" the class inequities and social injustices of his world. Furthermore, this exclusion makes Hyacinth aware of the socially constructed nature of established conceptions of physical normality and abnormality; it is London society, he understands, that limits one's "spirit" from expanding "only in the best conditions," as determined by the bounds of "tradition" (163, 165). It is this awareness of his own exclusion due to his physical difference that contributes to Hyacinth's formulation of his revolutionary politics and his

vow to join an assassination plot. However, while James is able in this novel to imagine something that resembles a disability consciousness far more radical and modern than that presented, for instance, in the figure of Davis' Lois Yare, he ultimately does not achieve a full expression of this consciousness in political action.

> Doctor Wilson was a man of standing who loved his home and his children and good books and his wife and correct syntax...he brought his sons up between the Bible and the dictionary.... Wilson became the state

John Dos Passos' acerbic critique of Woodrow Wilson and his cold-blooded contributions to American deaths in World War I appears almost exactly at the midpoint of *1919* (1932), the second novel of his *U.S.A.* trilogy, dividing both the narratives of the fictional characters Joe Williams and Anne Trent as well as the fragmentary journalistic treatments of Czarist Russia and the rise of the Soviet state, while it simultaneously exists as a political critique in the literary mode of satire that emphasizes the inextricability of literature and politics. Though an innovative modernist, Dos Passos also wrote within a tradition of creative and multifarious American literary-political engagements from the nineteenth century. The works I have chosen to discuss in this book, though on the surface not always appearing to be of significant literary distinction or interested centrally with political issues, can enrich our understanding of nineteenth-century America's conceptions of the possibilities and responsibilities of literature as well as its conceptions of popular democracy, industrialization, African-American women, the law, political agitation, and disability.

Of course, other literary works from this period offer further such enrichment and therefore merit additional study as forms of nineteenth-century American literary-political engagements. Washington Irving's *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835), Herman Melville's *Israel Potter* (1855), John Greenleaf Whittier's long poem "Snow-Bound" (1866) along with Rebecca Harding Davis' short story "The Man in the Cage" (1877) and Charles Chesnutt's "The Wife of His Youth" (1898), Louisa May Alcott's *Little Men* (1871), Mary Swift Lamson's biography *Life and Education of Laura Dewey Bridgman, The Deaf, Dumb, and Blind Girl* (1878), and Nathaniel Southgate Shaler's late-nineteenth century poems on the Civil War, for instance, might be examined as literary engagements with, respectively, the myth of the "vanishing Indian" as justification for Native-American removals, the troubled relationship between antebellum nationalist ideologies and slavery, the promises and failures of Reconstruction, the role of private philanthropy in post-war social organization, the expanding

enfranchisement of diverse political voices, and critiques of Republican leadership in the last decades of the century. The “aesthetic judgement[s]” on political matters advanced in such literary works as the ones considered in the present study and their contemporaries offer us valuable insight into nineteenth-century America.

CHAPTER ONE

EDGAR ALLAN POE'S CONSERVATIVE COMEDY

As scholars like Michael Allen, Michael T. Gilmore, and Terence Whalen note of Edgar Allan Poe's relation to the rapidly changing and expanding publishing industry of his time, the rise in textual production in a publishing business that had, by the 1830s, become the leading industry in major cities like Boston and New York resulted in a "crisis of surplus," the emergence of a mass readership, and (at least for Poe) "a corresponding crisis in literary value" and purpose. While the population of the United States expanded, the material economic facts of production became a less influential factor in determining which texts would and would not be published (see, for instance, Whalen 76ff). Critics have thus recognized Poe's continual efforts—in response to these broadening, and one might say democratizing, publishing efforts—to differentiate between critical and popular taste. Poe engaged antebellum mass culture by various means: critical reviews of antebellum texts, the development of an aesthetics of form, editorship of magazines, self-promotion, and critiques of Jacksonian democracy by using humor to ridicule, and promote the revision of, what he understood as vulgar antebellum tastes which produced vulgar literary visions of the body, the latter of which shall be the focus of this chapter.

Visions of abnormal bodies in popular culture and Poe's short fiction offer productive grounds upon which to examine these issues for, in conscious opposition to the popular entertainment of his day with its crudely excessive corporeal violence, Poe worked to compose texts that would either counter such vulgar literature with more aesthetically tasteful productions or satirize these popular and "common"—in the most pejorative senses of the terms—American tastes. In the words of William Carlos Williams, this critical pose was Poe's "backstroke from the swarming 'population'" and the political chaos it fostered (221). Poe's diverse, highly imaginative prose works represent a conservative theorization of the body within the bounds of a "normality" that is never explicitly delineated. The body is thus defined by the fact that it exists

within inescapable and irrefutable boundaries which can only be transcended or escaped in the realm of fantasy and which, when poorly handled in a literary context, results in vulgarity. In this sense, Poe followed the dictates of the French biologist Cuvier, whom he admired, and who stressed, that "living bodies...have limits which they cannot surpass assigned to each of them by nature" (qtd. in Chai 120). The body is also characterized by an inherent frailty, for all humans are susceptible to damage and decay—physically, aesthetically, and politically—and it is this quality that must be continually guarded against, counteracted, or regulated in order to prevent degeneration into abnormality. To any given body that possesses the supposedly natural quality of completeness while containing its frailties, Poe's fiction grants the status of a recognizable site of reality, a fact that, tautologically, testifies to its normality. Culture also plays a role in establishing bodily normality, for although mass culture may produce aesthetically vulgar visions of physicality, the body nevertheless must exist with its "natural" qualities within a social context. Bodies inevitably participate in social interactions, and the effectiveness of such participation is both a function and an indication of the degree to which they fall into, or outside, the bounds of "normality." This vision of the body is presented in a unique format in Poe's fiction, a manner that, in and of itself, develops intriguing theorizations of physical existence.

Many of Poe's short fictional pieces employ humor in order to subvert vulgar depictions of the body and advance his own imaginative, yet strictly normative, body theory. Poe took comedy seriously and, generally speaking, spent more time revising his comedic tales as compared to his serious and more well-known fictional and critical pieces. Even at his most humorously contemptuous and satiric, William Carlos Williams observes, Poe strives to convey "an authenticity—since he is not seeking to destroy but to assert" (225), a fact particularly salient in his comic companion pieces, "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and "A Predicament." These two pieces from 1838 are mean-spirited jabs at the physically oriented excesses of sensational popular literature of the antebellum era. In a similar fashion, as I shall explain later in this chapter, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's comic sketches, greatly admired by Poe, skillfully differentiate between educated first-person narrators and the vulgar masses they encounter while using the very format and dialogue of crude frontier storytelling to advance social critiques against the common rabble to which the rise of Jacksonian democracy in this period claimed to grant political value.

Assumed as part of such an endeavor was an elitism born out of the intellectual distance between the skilled writer and a mass readership

which Poe enforced throughout his critical writings. In an 1841 review, for instance, Poe asserts a distinction between the reader who gains discriminative pleasure from a well-written tale and the undifferentiated mass of popular fiction which the public "is content to swallow," being the "great-gander" that it is. In order to highlight the power of the skilled writer to manipulate the thoughts and impressions of less astute readers, Poe's literary criticism and reviews repeatedly reference a mass readership capable of being led about by the nose of its baser desires for simple entertainment. Indeed, William Henry Harrison's successful "Log Cabin Campaign" of the previous year, typically cited as the first presidential campaign in U.S. history to make broad use of popular advertising techniques to appeal to the common man, could easily have been imagined as lending credence to this view. As historian Gary May summarizes, the 1840 Harrison-Tyler Whig presidential campaign has been called everything from "'ridiculous'" to "'preposterous,'" a "campaign that gave full birth to the political 'image makers'" as "the rallies, parades, and general malarkey energized millions of Americans" while more dignified politicians (including even Tyler himself) "found the new politics extremely distasteful" (55-56).

This sort of literary authority and political elitism informs Poe's comedy and indicates his professional desire to, in Terence Whalen's words, "protect him[self] from being sullied or engulfed by the literate masses" (96). With sensationalistic prose garnering great popularity in the 1820s and 1830s, the comic tale that incorporated the conventions of such prose in order to subvert them offered Poe a means by which to engage mass cultural texts on something like their own ground without having to resort to what were, to his mind, the loftier, respectable pursuits of poetry and thus risk tarnishing them. The use of individual instances of abnormality to help delineate the broader ground of a unified category of "the normal" was a primary element of Poe's comedic prose texts. In *Eureka*, one of his last major works, Poe contends that "peculiarities… [and] protuberances above the plane of the ordinary" is where "Reason feels her way" (1293). These same lines had appeared in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," published seven years earlier, apparently so significant and so keenly representative of Poe's beliefs that they were recycled, in virtually identical form, in the "prose poem" Poe intended to stand as his most complete work of science and philosophy. From this perspective, rather than offering alternative visions of reality or revealing the category of the "normal" to be socially constructed and contingent, "peculiarities" and other abnormal phenomena marring the smooth fabric of nature and the social and aesthetic order are valuable only insofar as they testify to

"truth" in a general sense as well as the "truth" of normality as a universal condition. The project of controlling antebellum tastes operated in conjunction with the project of controlling physical abnormality.

Two of Poe's most famous satirical pieces on the bodies of vulgar popular literature appeared jointly in 1838: "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and "A Predicament." In later years Poe would always publish the two together. These pieces are simultaneously mean-spirited jabs at the physically oriented excesses of sensational magazine stories and popular politics of the period as well as critiques of New England Transcendental (or "Transcendental" as Poe understands it) beliefs in the valorization of mind to the absolute exclusion of the body. His assault on philosophies attentive only to the spiritual or mental elements of human experience begins in the opening sentences of "How to Write a Blackwood Article" where the narrator histrionically identifies herself as "Signora Psyche Zenobia"—a figure often assumed to be Margaret Fuller—and proclaims "that's me, I'm *all* soul" (336).[1] In alternative versions of this tale published by Poe in the 1840s, not only Zenobia's character but the cherished texts and authors of her Transcendentalist circle are attacked as well in the pandering editor's advice that "A little reading of the 'Dial' will carry you a great way," along with texts by Goethe (342). Representing a figure dedicated to, and in her view composed solely of, 'pure' spirituality and mentality, Psyche Zenobia strives to impose her philosophy onto society at large. Under her editorship, she tells the reader haughtily, the publication of her transcendental club has reversed its trend of being "all low—very! No profundity, no reading, no metaphysics" and now offers readers what "the learned call spirituality" (338). The posture of a corrective aesthetic and learned eye is, however, precisely what Poe will charge Zenobia with lacking. Despite her "success" as a transcendental editor, Psyche Zenobia has now come to the offices of Mr. Blackwood, the well-known Edinburgh editor, seeking advice on how to write for popular magazines. Considered by Anglo-American physicians as the intellectual center of professional medicine since the eighteenth century, Edinburgh ironically represents the site of physiological knowledge that Blackwood and Zenobia will hopelessly confuse. It is also noteworthy that one of Edinburgh's most popular periodicals, the *Edinburgh Review*, was regularly ridiculed for its liberal views by proslavery proponents in antebellum America and by conservative opponents of expanded rights for poor laborers.

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all references to Poe's prose are taken from volumes two and three of the *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*.

Achieving popularity with the reading public requires that Psyche Zenobia learn to write a much more embodied sort of text than the transcendental publications she usually produces: a text of fantastic physical excesses. "Should you ever be drowned or hung," one of Blackwood's first instructions informs her, "be sure and make a note of your sensations—they will be worth to you ten guineas a sheet" (340). Well-received pieces, for example, were those which, taking the genres of autobiography and the medical case-study to ridiculous extremes, gave sensational first-person accounts of being buried or burned alive. Thus, the writer for a magazine like Blackwood's must give the public a description of mental operations in a context of physical damage that, in reality, makes such intellectual activity impossible. In the decade of the 1830s, however, when Poe published most of the tales discussed in this chapter, such disgusting and bizarre bodily subjects were standard fare for readers in the United States, and they were often presented in a seemingly legitimate manner. The fantastic accounts of people being burned alive and recording their sensations described by Blackwood, for example, might not have seemed so far-fetched when presented in the more neutral tone adopted by health reformer William Alcott in his textbook on the human body. In this book Alcott states that science has proven humans are able "to resist extreme heat. By long practice, men have become able to remain in ovens and other places, heated to 220°, and even 270° of Fahrenheit, for ten or twelve minutes at a time" (244). As David Reynolds concisely concludes in his extensive study on the popular texts of this period, "The least that can be said is that the antebellum public was fed an increasingly spicy diet of horror, gore, and perversity in both the penny papers and in the closely allied genres of trial pamphlets and criminal biographies" (171). We should note the confusion such an extensive "diet" must have created for antebellum readers. Interfamilial murder, torture, cannibalism, and dismemberment were common topics, but the manner in which periodicals of the time reported such events left doubt as to whether these topics were news, amusement, sadistic voyeurism, or some bizarre combination of all three.

"Gross frontier humor," for instance, a widespread genre of "gross and brutal comedy" in popular American literature and theater from the 1830s to the 1850s, offered readers the weird physical extravagancies of "eye gougings, nose chawings, [and] panther skinnings" encouraging readers to, as Reynolds puts it, "snicker continually" at this violence (451; also see Rourke 183-184). The confusion between comedic fiction and serious reporting in such popular texts of the period may be attributed to language as well as subject matter, for the linguistic flexibility played out in the

mass media contributed to conceptual chaos. All of these confusions were aggravated by the fact that, beginning in the early 1830s, printed material in the United States became increasingly cheaper to produce and purchase regularly. The antebellum reading public was, therefore, probably more diverse in terms of class than at any previous period in American history. Though the reading material they consumed offered highly ambiguous and confusing visions of the body, both the broader American reading public and Zenobia's transcendental circle were, from Poe's point of view, poor audiences with limited perspectives. In their patronage of magazines and newspapers, the antebellum mass readership implicitly made absurd demands for bodily visions that, ignoring reason and good taste, played to their desires for titillation regardless of how extravagant or linguistically chaotic these visions appeared.[2] At the same time, the more restricted New England readership of Zenobia's transcendental club journal just as unreasonably patronized "spiritual" texts purged of all physical facts. Zenobia's work thus either ignores the body entirely (as in the case of her own periodical) or adopts only vulgar physical subject matter (as in the case of Blackwood's) but does not attempt to depict bodies in a manner Poe would deem "realistic" or aesthetically pleasing. Much has been written about Poe's simultaneous disdain for, and courting of, the favor of a mass, diverse reading public, a personal ambivalence Michael T. Gilmore describes as a "mixture of accommodation and resistance" to "the market" (12; see also Hartmann). On the one hand, this broad market displayed a gross absence of literary discernment, an intellectual faculty Poe felt to be sorely lacking in America as a whole. On the other hand, this public lavished fame and (some) money on Poe's own fantastic magazine pieces. Indeed, in his critical writings Poe often considers the ability to make a single literary work appeal to multiple audiences one indicator of a great artist. Yet one of the things Poe seems to have disliked most about antebellum American readers, even irrespective of region or class, was

[2] In 1864, poet, literary critic, and later, diplomat James Russell Lowell penned an extensive critique of prevailing European views on the Civil War that the Union and Lincoln himself were too "provincial" in their views of national unity while denying the strength of genuine patriotism in the democratic North. In "The President's Policy," Lowell sarcastically rejects such views held by conservative "teachers of political philosophy" who could only imagine civilizations as "long periods of aristocracy...broken now and then by awkward parentheses of mob" (59). Lowell's phrase indicates his accusation that anti-democratic Europeans, and implicitly Southern elitists (in which latter category I would place Poe), could only conceive of the common man as simultaneously politically *and* aesthetically annoying.

their repeated reluctance to appreciate as well as represent normal bodily realities in a manner befitting what he considered to be "legitimate" or "tasteful" literature.

In the 1830s, the period of many of Poe's comic tales, the lack of artistic taste displayed by popularly consumed literature bothered him immensely. Writing in 1839 to his friend Philip Cooke, upon whose literary "judgment" Poe claimed to place high "value," Poe advises that one of the magazines he recently read was "not worth your notice" for "It is not pleasant to be taxed with the twaddle of other people" (*Letters* 1: 118, 77). In his criticism and reviews Poe frequently praises contemporary writers of "consummate tact" while disparaging those works lacking in "refined art," such as a Western adventure novel by William Gilmore Simms he found to be in "villainously bad taste" due to its excessive physical violence. Yet such texts were being read, and praised, by the American public, a frustrating contradiction for the young Poe who struggled for success in the world of antebellum periodicals and believed his literary tastes to be accurate. In 1839 we find Poe telling Cooke he would bravely "suffer [his own tale] 'Ligeia' to remain as it is," despite a poor reception, because he had determined its literary merit to be sound (*Letters* 1: 118). Although he always desired "to be read," Poe took great pride in running counter to popular tastes for he assumed this opposition, by the very fact that it disagreed with him, legitimated his faith in his own tastes while offering further testimony to the poor tastes of the masses. "Generally people praise extravagantly those [magazine tales] of which I am ashamed" he asserts in 1835, and he later tells Cooke, "As for the mob—let them talk on....I should be grieved if I thought they comprehended me" (*Letters* 1: 78, 118). It is no wonder, therefore, that Poe greatly admired Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's comic sketches which skillfully differentiate between educated first person narrators and the vulgar masses they encounter while using the format and dialogue of crude frontier storytelling to advance social critiques. At the end of Longstreet's "The Horse Swap" (1833/1835), for instance, the narrator Hall's dignified and sympathetic reaction to a horse's injury contrasts sharply with the Georgia crowd's cruel one: "The removal of the blanket, disclosed a sore on Bullet's backbone that seemed to have defied all medical skill. It measured six full inches in length…My heart sickened at the sight; and I felt that the brute who had been riding him in that situation deserved the halter. The

prevailing feeling, however, was that of mirth. The laugh became loud and general" (18).[3]

As Longstreet's work demonstrated for Poe, critiquing the crude demands of the populace while avoiding slipping outside the bounds of one's own good taste required a deft engagement with mass culture, and Poe seems always to have feared becoming a member of the "mob." Reflecting on the reception of his "horrible" necrophilic tale "Berenice" (1835) to the editor Thomas White, Poe writes that "The history of all Magazines shows plainly that those which have attained celebrity were indebted for it to articles *similar in nature—to Berenice*." He was quick to defend himself, however, from charges of "bad taste" that would place his work in the same category as extravagancies of the physically graphic, sensational type so common in antebellum periodicals: "I allow that ["Berenice"] approaches the very verge of bad taste—but I will not sin quite so egregiously again" (*Letters* 1: 57-8). Attacking other writers' vulgar texts in the mode of critical reviews could be tricky business as well for Poe recognized that treating these writings seriously would, in many cases, do them too much justice, thereby indicating that the critic himself has been seduced by their sensationalism. Comedy, as Longstreet also discovered, offered a ready solution to this dilemma by providing a means of attacking vulgar writing from the critical distance and authority that accompany mockery.[4] In a letter written in the winter of 1835, Poe describes reading a brash reviewer who approached an epic poem about a Cockney tailor in a manner designed to produce "downright horse-laughter." "Levity here was indispensable," Poe writes admiringly, "Indeed

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[3] Such attribution of a barbaric sense of humor to a group as a means of differentiating them pejoratively as socially abnormal may also be noted in Edgar Rice Burroughs' pioneering science fiction novel, *A Princess of Mars* (1917), when John Carter, the self-proclaimed "gentleman of Virginia," finds himself disgusted with his initial encounters with the multi-limbed green Martians or "Tharks." Their "ideas of humor...are widely at variance with our conceptions of incitants to merriment. The death agonies of a fellow being are, to these strange creatures, provocative of the wildest hilarity, while their chief form of commonest amusement is to inflict death on their prisoners of war in various ingenious and horrible ways" (45). The sociopolitically backwards Tharks, "A people without written language, without art, without homes, without love," are first identified as physically distinct from Carter and as comedically crude (92). The only two Tharks Carter does befriend, Tars Tarkas and Sola, are distinguished by their refraining from laughter at crucial moments of cruelty.

[4] Similarly, in his 1839 essay "The Comic" Ralph Waldo Emerson writes that humor allows the intellectually astute writer to examine his world "at a sufficient distance" (*Complete Works* 8: 161).

how otherwise the subject could have been treated I do not perceive. To treat a tailor's Epic seriously…would have defeated the ends of the critic, in weakening his own authority by making himself ridiculous." The result was—and this comment is significant given Poe's lifelong drive to develop himself into a powerful literary critic—"the most effective Review I remember to have read" (*Letters* 1: 77). Comedy, particularly satire, had the power to make bizarre or absurd divergences from reality the butts of jokes, thus allowing an author to depict tasteless visions of the body in order to achieve a seemingly contradictory goal: the presentation of the body in a more conservative, realistic light worthy of true "literature." It was a challenge Poe felt his contemporary Longstreet met admirably in his 1835 sketch "The Fight," which Poe favorably reviewed. "Although involving some horrible and disgusting details of southern barbarity," the tale was written, Poe assesses, in "vivid truth to nature" with "forcible, accurate" depictions of "real existences" that made it superior to common texts of frontier humor (*Complete Works* 8: 261). By such means, writers like Poe and Longstreet were able to "absorb… sensational literature but mightily resist…the prevailing tendency toward vulgarization" (Reynolds 225). Their use of sensational literature's "disquieting images or character types" to respond to American popular literature itself thus represented, in David S. Reynolds' apt phrasing, "an American autocriticism" (225).

In "How to Write a Blackwood Article" satire manifests itself in the editor's advice encouraging Zenobia's production of tasteless material for the masses. At the same time, Poe constructs the humor of his tale to emphasize the way in which this advice comically jerks Psyche Zenobia back into a painful, inescapable bodily reality that popular magazine stories and her brand of transcendental philosophy so casually ignore. Not all of Blackwood's advice concerns physically unrealistic situations; he claims his "instructions will apply equally well to any variety of misadventure, and on your way home you may easily get knocked in the head, or run over by an omnibus, or bitten by a mad dog, or drowned in a gutter" (341). At this point, the reader of Poe's satire may recognize that an aspiring hack writer like Zenobia will never be faced with the opportunity of being buried alive and living to write about it, but anyone might well be in danger of being waylaid on the streets of Edinburgh, hit by a bus, or infected with a disease like rabies. Humanity's embodied condition renders escape from such potential hazards impossible. As the conclusion of the tale indicates, even the gaudily transcendental Psyche Zenobia balks at the possibility of actual physical harm. Though taking Blackwood's advice about fantastic stories quite amiably, she abruptly

refuses his offer to help her make a splash in the magazine business by getting her "eaten up" by a pack of particularly vicious "bulldogs in the yard" near his office. The reader laughs at a conclusion that reveals Zenobia's hypocrisy. The imaginative "transcendence" of physical limitations achieved in Psyche Zenobia's philosophical system and in the stories Blackwood publishes has reached its limit, and that limit is the frailty and impermanence of corporeal reality. Zenobia's hypocrisy derives from her attempts to ignore this limit in theory but not in practice in the foolish belief she can deny her physicality when it suits her. "How to Write a Blackwood Article" is thus an early comedic expression of an insight Poe would offer more sincerely in his later philosophic tale "Mesmeric Revelation": humans "will never be bodiless."

Though Thomas Mabbott represents a well-established critical view when he contends that Poe mistakenly "thought combination of elements that do not belong together produced a comic effect, and so aimed at low comedy, farce, and burlesque," this assessment fails to appreciate how Poe constructs his comic tales and his vision of the body around contradictions in complex and effective ways (*Collected Works* 2: xx). The incompatibility of theory and practice, or imagination and bodily reality, in "How to Write a Blackwood Article" generates genuine, intellectual humor that advances a logical and consistent argument. Blackwood continually advises the recording of sensations, an act of intellectual processing and linguistic production, while the writer is in a state of extreme physical injury. To "get" the joke, to be on the "right" side of the satire, readers must recognize their own belief in the impossibility of mind existing and operating properly when the body is in an unhealthy and excessively damaged state. The fallacious existence of pure, sovereign, and solitary mind unaffected by the body in which it is housed is, therefore, a target of "How to Write a Blackwood Article," but it is a common theme in a number of Poe's tales. "King Pest," another satirical piece written several years before "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and conventionally understood as a jab at Andrew Jackson's administration, parodies the sovereign, disembodied mind in the strikingly original image of a skeleton turned upside-down "In the cranium" of which "lay a quantity of ignited charcoal, which threw a fitful but vivid light over the entire scene" of a disgusting banquet of grotesques amidst a pestilential city (248). The enlightenment projected by the skull of a body literally stripped of physicality is, Poe suggests, weak at best, the sovereign mind only a "fitful" lump of coal swinging over a dead or dying society. Just as importantly, in this tale disease renders bodies abnormal and causes the mind to fail. Poe also linguistically, and even playfully, depicts the