

The Deception of the Vision in Poe's Tales

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I

In Edgar Allan Poe's tales, narrators, in many cases, are doomed to go into the world of insanity. The causes leading the narrators into madness are the opium, alcohol and so on. For example, the narrator in "Ligeia" is completely out of his mind because of taking the opium: "In the excitement of my opium dreams (for I was habitually fettered in the shackles of the drug) I would call aloud upon her name,..."(120). And the narrator in "The Black Cat" negates his madness: "For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not---and very surely do I not dream"(320), but in spite of the narrator's negation, it is doubtless that he is mad because of alcoholism: "One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer"(321).

What is interesting, in contrast with these two narrators, is that the narrator in "The Oval Portrait" is, on the other hand, free from such insanity as the two narrators have. Instead of such madness, the narrator in "The Oval Portrait" has only what he says 'delirium.' He after all never goes beyond the delirium into the world of insanity.

It is worth noting that the narrator in "The Oval Portrait" could say: "It was an impulsive movement to gain time for thought---to make sure that my vision had not deceived me..."(251). He was not deceived by what his vision simply saw. While he was not deceived by his vision, two narrators in "Ligeia" and "The Black Cat" were after all deceived by their visions. Such deceived perception finally led these two narrators into the destruction of themselves. Hence, it may be possible to say that since the moment of the narrator's deceived perception, the fatal doom for the narrator has been perfectly and finally designed by Poe. And the reader will experience the processes of the narrators' psychological responses to such vision-deceiving scenes caused by the influence of the opium or alcohol¹.

In the following discussion, the importance of the moment of the narrator's deceived perception in connection with the destruction of themselves will be treated. In this paper, however, "The Oval Portrait," "Ligeia" and "The Black Cat" will be seen from this point of

view.

II

First of all it will be necessary to show how such a vision-deceiving scene is designed by Poe in his tales. For example, the room of Roderick Usher in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is described as follows: "The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recess of the vaulted and fretted ceiling"(141-42). Here in this dark, gloomy room, the function of the vision is limited. Under these fettered circumstances to the vision, what if the narrator is given some other influence by drug and so on? It is very natural that all the senses including the vision tend to be illusionary². Or it might be possible to say that the senses are too 'acute.' Thus, for example, the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" can say: "True!---nervous---very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses---not destroyed---not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad?"(277). In spite of his negation, it is evident that he is out of his mind and his sharpened senses are caused by his insanity³.

However, it is very worth noting that not all of the narrators in Poe's tales are made to step into the world of insanity, under the circumstances of such a vision-deceiving scene. In this context the narrator in "The Oval Portrait" is important to be shown as an example, because he was not deceived by such deception of the vision.

It may be necessary to show the chamber where the narrator narrates this tale. The room itself resembles that of Roderick Usher and the pentagonal room in "Ligeia." For instance, the narrator in "The Oval Portrait" says:"We established ourselves in one of the smallest and least sumptuously furnished apartments. It lay in a remote turret of the building. Its decorations were rich, yet tattered and antique. Its walls were hung with tapestry and bedecked with manifold and multiform armorial trophies, together with an unusually great number of very spirited modern paintings in frames of rich golden arabesque"(250). So the narrator seems to be under the influence of the vision-deceiving scene.

In this tale, the narrator takes no opium nor alcohol. But it should be noted that he was deeply wounded when he entered the chateau:"The chateau into which my valet had ventured to make forcible entrance, rather than permit me, in my desperately wounded condition, to pass a night in the open air, was one of those piles of commingled gloom and grandeur which have

so long frowned among the Apennines, not less in fact than in the fancy of Mrs Radcliffe”(250). The narrator’s ”wounded condition” seems to be affected very easily by the gloomy air of the chateau. Poe writes very suggestively that the narrator is in the condition of ”delirium” : ”In these paintings, which depended from the walls not only in their main surfaces, but in very many nooks which the bizarre architecture of the chateau rendered necessary---in these paintings my incipient delirium, perhaps, had caused me to take interest---so that I bade Pedro to close the heavy shutters of the room...”(250). Here it is interesting that the narrator’s ”wounded condition” seems to be strengthened into a kind of mental illness by the usage of the world ”delirium.”

It is very natural that this delirium causes the narrator a sense of the ”deceived perception.” By the contemplation of the pictures on the walls, the narrator in delirium loses the sense of the time:”Long---long I read---and devoutly, devoutly I gazed. Rapidly and gloriously the hours flew by, and the deep midnight came”(250)⁴ .

Along with the sense of the deceived perception of the hours, the narrator writes that his ”vision” might have been deceived when he saw the ”Oval Portrait” : ”I thus saw in vivid light a picture all unnoticed before. It was the portrait of a young girl just ripening into womanhood. I glanced at the painting hurriedly, and then closed my eyes. Why I did this was not at first apparent even to my perception. But while my lids remained thus shut, I ran over in mind my reason for so shutting them. It was an impulsive movement to gain time for thought---to make my fancy for a more sober and more certain gaze. In a very few moments I again looked fixedly at the painting”(251). He was not completely deceived, but was sober enough to control his delirium.

Hence, in his awakened condition, he could add by saying as follows:”That I now saw aright I could not and would not doubt; for the first flashing of the candles upon the canvas had seemed to dissipate the dreamy stupor which was stealing over my senses, and to startle me at once into waking life”(251). After all the narrator could return from the brink of this stupor caused by the narrator’s wounded condition and delirium. Unlike the two narrators in ”The Black Cat” and ”Ligeia,” the one in ”The Oval Portrait” could have some time to think, or in other words, he could have his reason. Therefore, it seems always fatal for the narrator in Poe’s tales whether he keeps his reason upon facing such perception-deceiving scenes.

III

After showing the example of the narrator who is not deceived by his vision, it is now necessary to present an example of the narrator whose deceived vision evidently marks that he has stepped into the world of insanity. For example, in ”Ligeia,” the narrator’s vision is completely confused and then deceived in his madness, when he faces the revivification of his

deceased former wife Ligeia.

Only one instance of the narrator's deceived vision takes place in the death bed scene of his wife Rowena. Here it should always be remembered that the corpse of Rowena was enshrouded when she was dead: "..., I sat alone, with her shrouded body"(122). It is hard to imagine how she is enshrouded, but it is gradually shown in this tale. Poe writes: "In a short period it was certain, however, that a relapse had taken place; the color disappeared from both eyelid and cheek, leaving a wanness even more that that of marble; the lips became doubly shrivelled and pinched up in the ghastly expression of death; a repulsive claminess and coldness overspread rapidly the surface of the body"(123-24).

From this quotation, it can be supposed that there is no covering over the face of the corpse, because the narrator mentions about the eyelid, cheek and lips. This can be supported by the following from "Ligeia" : "There was now a partial glow upon the forehead and upon the cheek and throat"(124).

Along with the forehead, there seems no "coverings" over the temples of the corpse because Poe writes that " I chafed and bathed the temples and the hands"(124).

However, in the following quotation, it becomes evident that the corpse is bound by the " bandages." : "The hues of life flushed up with unwonted energy into the countenance---the limbs relaxed---and, save the eyelids were yet pressed heavily together, and that the bandages and draperies of the grave still imparted their charnel character to the figure;..."(125). Here it is very important to know where the bandages were bound. It has already been shown that the temples, forehead, eyelids, lips and throat are not bound by the bandages, because the narrator has clearly seen them. After all, where are the bandages bound?

Very strangely, Poe writes about the bandages soon after this quotation:"The bandage lay heavily about the mouth"(125). Is it really possible for the narrator to see the lips? As a matter of fact, he soon writes as follows:"The bandage lay heavily about the mouth---but then might it not be the mouth of the breathing Lady of Tremaine?" He seems to be able to recognize the mouth of the Lady of Tremaine, in spite of the heavy bandages about her mouth.

Again, is it really possible to recognize the changes in the tinge of the lips when the narrator says:"...the lips became doubly shrivelled and pinched up in the ghastly expression of death"(123).

The bandage perhaps might have fallen down from the head heavily over the mouth: "One bound, and I had reached her feet! Shrinking from my touch, she let fall from her head, unloosened, the ghastly cerements which had confined it, and then streamed forth..."(126). But the possibility of the bandage falling down from the head can be negated, because it is only in this situation that the bandage is "unloosened" from the head.

Here we can suppose that Poe made contradiction in this tale, but it is hardly possible when

we think of him as such a skillful writer. So it is possible to think that the narrator's vision was deceived under the influence of the opium. He was after all "a bounden slave in the trammels of opium"(118).

The reader will experience the narrator's psychological responses to the horrible revivification of Ligeia while reading this tale. But at the same time it is important to note that the reader can also experience the very moment of his going into the world of insanity, which can be marked by his deceived vision.

IV

Another example of the narrator's deceived perception will be seen in "The Black Cat." As is very well-known, the narrator in this tale is alcoholic, which very naturally succeeds to lead the narrator to the realm of such a condition as the delirium of the narrator in "The Oval Portrait." The narrator in "The Black Cat" says: "Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years, during which my general temperament and character---through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance---had (I brush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the others"(321). Here again, Poe prepares a stage of the narrator's alcoholism, which will easily lead him to the brink of madness, never to return.

So it is possible to say that this tale shows stages of the narrator's 'shrinking reason' : "One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame. I took from my waistcoat-pocket a penknife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket!"(321-22). In spite of his "atrocious" caused by alcoholism, however, we should note that he still retains his reason: "When reason returned with the morning---when I had slept off the fumes of the night's debauch---I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty;..."(322).

But after all he was a prey to the phantasm of the cat he killed. His reason tries hard to explain the relief of the cat upon the white plastering of his burnt down house, but in vain:"Although I thus readily accounted to my reason, if not altogether to my conscience, for the startling fact just detailed, it did not the less fail to make a deep impression upon my fancy" (324).

Thus the narrator reaches the almost final stage of the deceived perception. He no longer has enough reason to negate the deceived perception. He writes:"One night as I sat, half

stupified, in a den of more than infamy, my attention was suddenly drawn to some object, reposing upon the head of one of the immense hogsheads of Gin, or of Rum,... I approached it, and touched it with my hand. It was a black cat---a very large one---fully as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one. Pluto had not a white hair upon any portion of his body; but this cat had a large, although indefinite sprotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast”(324). It should be noted that the narrator closely observes the whole body of this cat. He even says that this cat resembles Pluto ”in every respect but one.” But very strangely he adds soon as follows: ”What added, no doubt, to my hatred of the beast, was the discovery, on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also had been deprived of one of its eyes”(325). Is it reasonable that he recognized its 'one eye' on the next morning? Was not he careful enough to see closely the whole body of the cat? Did not he say that the cat resembles Pluto in every respect but its white sprotch on the breast?

It may be possible to think of this scene as an example of contradiction. But such a skillful writer as Poe will almost never make so apparent a mistake. This is rather another example of the narrator's deceived perception, caused, in this instance, by alcoholism. After all his vision was deceived by the influence of alcohol at the time when he first saw the cat. The fact that he could not recognize the 'one eye' shows that his vision was deceived.

This deceived vision naturally leads the narrator to his disasterous doom. His reason dies out: ”Beneath the pressure of torments such as these, the feeble remnant of the good within me succumbed. Evil thoughts became my sole intimates---the darkest and most evil of thoughts. The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and all mankind; while, from the sudden, frequent, and ungovernable outbursts of a fury to which I now blindly abandoned myself, my uncomplaining wife, alas! was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers”(326). But in his madness he murdered his uncomplaining wife, thus concluding his doom.

V

Just like the influence of the opium in ”Ligeia,” that of alcohol caused the deceived vision to the narrator in ”The Black Cat.” The narrators in both tales are easily deceived under the influence of the opium or alcohol, but the one in ”The Oval Portrait” did not become the prey of his deceived vision. The latter was in a sense saved by his retaining his reason. This evidently shows that in Poe's tales the narrators's retaining their reasons against the vision deceiving scenes keeps them from falling into the destruction. Therefore, the tales of Poe are composed in the delicate equilibrium between the perception connected with reason and the deceived perception disconnected with reason. And the reader will experience with the narrator the very moment and processes of going into the world of insanity.

Works Cited

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Notes

1. In "The Self-Consuming Narrator in Poe's 'Ligeia' and 'Usher'," Ronald Bieganowski writes: "Just as the reader becomes an active mediator containing the psychological effects of the story's utterance, so the narrator's imagination records a series of psychological effects that constitute the action of Poe's text. To an important extent, some of Poe's most memorable stories record in vivid fashion the sequence of responses experienced by the narrator"(178). So it seems that "The Oval Portrait" is 'less' memorable, compared with "Ligeia" or "The Black Cat," because the former lacks direct psychological responses of the narrator facing the world of insanity.

2. David Ketterer writes about Poe's "half-closed eyes" in his *The Rationale of Deception in Poe*: "The effect of looking at the world through half-closed eyes is, of course, to blur the outlines and allow everything to fuse into everything else--in fact, to destroy the external universe as usually perceived and eradicate the barriers erected by time, space, and self. With the destruction of the reasoned world, the world of imagination can take over. 'The halfclosed eye' is, then, a metaphor both for the imagination and for the situation essential to the fruitful operation of the imagination. In looking out through half-closed eyes, Poe confuses sight and sound, sight and smell, fire and water, life and death, and the various other elements which man's reason keeps apart or regards as polarities"(28). And it is doubtless that such confusions can inevitably lead the narrator into the fatal situation.

3. James, W. Gargano also writes about the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" in his "The Question of Poe's Narrators" : "The sharp exclamations, nervous questions, and broken sentences almost too blatantly advertise Poe's conscious intention; the protagonist's painful insistence (on) 'proving' himself sane only serves to intensify the idea of his madness"(167).

4. Ketterer says about the decor of the pentagonal room in "Ligeia" : "To enter such a room is to lose equilibrium. Once the arabesque room is viewed correctly, through the half-closed eye, the original impression is seen to be deception. The dimensions of time and space give way to a new dimension that will allow Ligeia's return from the dead"(41).