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## **Poe's Survival Stories as Dying Colonialisms**

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### **Abstract and Keywords**

This chapter focuses on the appearance of historical details in short stories about near-death experiences. It examines in particular how “A Descent into the Maelström” and “The Pit and the Pendulum” refer to pre-Anglo-Saxon forms of New World colonization (Viking and Spanish) as a way of agitating readers’ anxieties about the rise of American civilization. These references provide examples through which to rethink the conflict between historicist and allegorical interpretations of Poe’s work. In particular, his oblique representations of Manifest Destiny and white supremacy look differently when read through the metahistorical notion of the “course of empire,” with its inevitable end in moral decay. The chapter concludes by pointing out how Poe’s scheme of extreme individual experience against the backdrop of long-duration historical narrative was taken up by Frantz Fanon, who focused on the psychological predicament of the native in a very different story of empire.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, metahistory, postcolonialism, course of empire, survival stories, allegory

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New Americanist literary criticism has long read Edgar Allan Poe within the historical context of antebellum racial and colonial ideology. Paradoxically, this scholarship has relied on Toni Morrison’s interpretation of race in Poe as a kind of “dehistoricizing allegory.”<sup>1</sup> This friction between historicism and allegory in Poe criticism has proven enormously productive. However, it has also tended to limit the scope of Poe’s work to the United States and its territorial ambitions. This means that Poe’s deep reading into what was then coming into focus as world literature, and his vast posthumous influence on that literature, both fall outside the purview of interests shared by Morrison and the New Americanists. This chapter takes a different view of these contradictions (historicism vs. allegory, American vs. world literature) by returning to Poe’s own engagements with certain aspects of period historical writing, specifically its notions of the “course of empire.” Poe consistently incorporates details from long-duration narratives of empire

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into short stories about extreme individual experience in ways that suggest he had a dialectical sense of the relation between history and allegory. This chapter takes as its starting point that Poe's perspective is metahistorical, in the sense that his aesthetic works through a formal critique of historical discourse.<sup>2</sup> This aspect of Poe's work has important implications for understanding his reliance on and play with antebellum fantasies of "Manifest Destiny" and white supremacy. It also helps explain the attraction of Poe's work for critics and artists seeking to represent and intervene on the history of slavery and colonialism.

Unlike the great historical thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Poe had little inclination to sweeping narrative forms. Instead, history enters his work in fragments, often borrowed from the vast visions of widely read historians. He was drawn to historical narratives which centered on the "course of empires," examples of which include Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) and Comte de Volney's *The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires* (1791). References to these authors appear across Poe's work. His most direct comments on the subject often pertain to his resistance to didacticism in art, such as when he condemns "the small, second-hand, Gibbon-ish pedantry of Byron" in an 1842 review of Longfellow's *Ballads* (ER: 692).

The productive friction between historicism and allegory in recent Poe criticism draws some of its energy from the fact that his antipathy to bogus moralism extended to historical writing. In an unsigned review of "The New York Gallery of the Fine Arts," from *The Broadway Journal*, the author writes of Thomas Cole's "The Course of Empire" series:

We dislike exceedingly Cole's allegorical landscapes in the New York Gallery. The pictures in themselves are truly beautiful, but the plan of them is against nature. Their beauty is marred by being seen together. We perceive immediately that we are imposed upon. Instead of looking upon beautiful landscapes, we discern that they are sermons in print; essays in gilt frames.<sup>3</sup>

Here again we find an apparently definitive argument against the use of art in the service of synoptic and ethical historical vision. Poe would have been especially attracted to Cole's series by newspaper advertisements which touted the exhibit with some lines from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: "First Freedom, and then Glory—when that fails,/ Wealth, vice, corruption,—barbarism at last."<sup>4</sup> A careful reader of Byron, Poe would have known this crucial stanza's argument for allegorical brevity. In Byron's glibly didactic, "Gibbon-ish" view, the rise and fall of empires was "the moral of all human tales." He goes on to make a case for poetry over history: "History with all her volumes vast,/ Hath but *one* page,—'tis better written here."<sup>5</sup> For Poe the allegorist and the advocate of concision, this premise might have held some significant attraction. However, in both the reviews of Longfellow and of the New York Gallery, we find instead resistance to allegorical moralizing insofar as it eclipses other, more sensational aesthetic effects. The unsigned *Broadway Journal* piece presents the problem as having to do with proportion, and the scale of the human in contrast with that of historical allegory: "The men in [The

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Course of Empire' series] are not seen at all when they are viewed at a proper distance, and if seen, they are subordinates, not principals, as they should be in a performance which professes to point to a moral." Here we find an argument for the scale of the human as incommensurate with the morality of long-duration narratives of empire. This problem is crucial to understanding the role of historical formalism in Poe's aesthetic practice. Hyperaware of their time- and space-bound perspective as sensate individuals, his narrators are doomed to misapprehend the large-scale historical processes shaping their experiences. They are close-up renderings of people unhappily caught in a Thomas Cole landscape they cannot appreciate.

The refined shape of historical narrative in the early decades of the nineteenth century exacerbated this problem for Poe. Course of empires thinking mixed two key models of history: cyclical and progressive, the first itself declining and the second on the rise in Poe's day. In the context of increasingly contested historical formalisms, how could one know whether one was living through a period of ascent or decline? In the antebellum US context, one might have wondered whether the historical tumult of frontier war, sectional conflict, and financial panics were the result of civilizational progress or the death throes of European colonialism. In the context of the age of revolutions, historical understanding came to seem increasingly urgent, and yet definitive figurations of individual lives within history proved elusive. These ambiguities define Poe's aesthetic practice: the heated interiority of his narrators and the anxious effects on his readers derive from his critical relation to the artificial morality of historical narrative.

This chapter examines two short stories, "A Descent into the Maelström" (1841) and "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), for references to antebellum debates about pre-Anglo-Saxon, specifically Viking and Spanish, New World colonization, respectively. The effect of foreboding in these tales relies on and exploits the unstable rhetoric around race, colonialism, civilization, and barbarism. Both stories represent the perspective of a seemingly doomed man—a fisherman nearly shipwrecked in the Norwegian Sea and a prisoner of the late Spanish Inquisition. The stories thus play on popular narratives of extreme experience and on the antebellum interest in death.<sup>6</sup> Both narrators are talented obsessives, ratiocinating the environmental and political forces that seem to control their fate. Yet at the same time, their foreshortened historical vision gets them into trouble. Both dwell on the tangential relation between their agency and their survival in ways that displace the question of their guilt or innocence, and likewise their implication in civilizational rise and fall. Finally, both ultimately cheat death through a combination of reasoning and good fortune. The narrative suspense in each tale relies on copiously elaborated spatial forms against which white narrators "signal" their "modernity," in Morrison's terms, but which also hold readers' attention on the sublimity of premodern topography and architecture.<sup>7</sup>

Poe frames these moments of jeopardy and survival in fragments of historical narrative to question both the premise of the United States as rising empire and the importance of the individual in US ideology. "A Descent into the Maelstrom" and "The Pit and the Pendulum" figure the individual not as a living expression of national ideals, but as the

subject and object of nation-building violence, in which fate is absolutely contingent. As a way out of the elaborately constructed deathtraps of these tales, the conclusion turns to Poe's influence on African diasporic thinking, in particular that of Frantz Fanon, whose account of the psychological predicament of the colonized eerily parallels the frenetic interiority of Poe's narrators, and whose theory of colonialism offers a counter to grand narratives of the "course of empire."

### **"A Descent into the Maelström": The Viking Conquest and White Guilt**

The most obvious influence on "A Descent into the Maelström" (1841) is not historical writing but Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which critics have read as an allegory for the French Revolution and British colonialism. Coleridge's meditation on guilt draws these interpretations with its symbolic suggestiveness. The narrative poem resolves in a totalizing but also individualizing ethical certitude ("He prayeth best, who loveth best/All things both great and small").<sup>8</sup> The Bridegroom leaves the scene of the poem a "sadder and a wiser man" having heard the Ancient Mariner's story.<sup>9</sup> Poe's story, on the other hand, offers no such reassurance, and it concludes with his narrator complaining that no one ever believes him. Poe constructs "A Descent into the Maelström" as an allegory out of a welter of descriptive detail—geographical, oceanographical, and ethnographical. In taking a scientific interest in accurate representation, Poe abandons the question of his mariner's guilt or innocence, giving his oblique references to the age of revolutions and colonial venturing an especially uncertain moral and political valence.

"A Descent into the Maelström" opens with the kind of racialized color symbolism that draws Morrison's interest. The Nordic setting requires that Poe make the links between color and racial terror without the real figure of Black people. Like the howling emptiness of the South Pole at the end of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, the whiteness of the aging fisherman's beard indicates the extremity of his experience: "You suppose me a very old man—but I am not. It took less than a single day to change these hairs from jetty black to white, to weaken my limbs, and to unstring my nerves, so that I tremble at the least exertion, and am frightened at a shadow" (M 2: 578). Poe sets this whiteness against the blackness of the Maelström, and his narrator reads the landscape in racial terms: "I looked dizzily, and beheld a wide expanse of ocean, whose waters wore so inky a hue as to bring at once to my mind the Nubian geographer's account of the Mare Tenebrarum. A panorama more deplorably desolate no human imagination can conceive" (M 2: 578–579). Poe's insistent application of the cultural logic of racial terror seems scattershot, randomly applied in conjuring a general mood of fear and anxiety.

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His ancient mariner registers the exoticism of the Norwegian setting by enumerating the names of the “small, bleak-looking ... hideously craggy and barren” islands surrounding the Maelström: “Yonder are Iflesen, Hoeyholm, Kieldholm, Suarven, and Buckholm. Farther off—between Moskoe and Vurrgh—are Otterholm, Flimen, Sandflesen, and Skarholm. These are the true names of places—but why it has been thought necessary to name them at all, is more than either you or I can understand” (M 2: 579). The old man sets up Norwegian seafaring and map-making as inaccessibly prehistoric, what Cole refers to in the first canvas of “The Course of Empire” as “The Savage State.” Poe’s self-reference here is the height of absurdity: he names these places to drown the reader in syllables marking the incomprehensible distance between the time of the tale and that of Norway’s founding.

However ancient their surroundings, the Norse fisherman admits he and his brother took the risk of fishing near the Maelström out of modern, calculating interest: “In all violent eddies at sea there is good fishing”; “we made it a matter of desperate speculation—the risk of life standing instead for labor, and courage answering for capital” (M 2: 583). This economic motive echoes the psychology of the colonist—venturing into the black unknown in search of surplus value. The “giddy” feeling the Maelström inspires is inseparable from this substitution of “risk” for “labor.” The perceptual and historical tricks continue with the narrator perceiving a kind of synaesthetic connection between the Maelström and a specifically US geography: “As the old man spoke, I became aware of a loud and gradually increasing sound, like the moaning of a vast herd of buffaloes upon an American prairie” (M 2: 580). Poe thus gives the Maelström an uncanny quality, at first representing its forbidding sublimity, then making it recognizable through one of the most familiar tropes of frontier aesthetics. These details recenter the tale in contemporary and specifically US concerns, in which the Maelström stands in for the frontier, and forays into it represent a mode of speculation.

Antebellum readers would have seen an obvious connection between New World settler colonialism and Nordic seafaring. In the late 1830s, Carl Christian Rafn, a Danish philologist working with the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries of Copenhagen, began publishing his research into the pre-Columbian discovery of America by the Vikings. His 1838 pamphlet, *America Discovered in the Tenth Century*, contained a précis of this work, which combined interpretations of medieval Norse sagas alongside other forms of archeological and geographical evidence suggesting that “ancient Northmen” had inhabited the Northeastern United States. Rafn’s claims had a significant impact on nineteenth-century US culture; his work was reprinted by journals and newspapers, recounted in lyceum lectures, and reflected on by writers and intellectuals like Edward Everett, George Bancroft, and Sarah Orne Jewett. Poe would have come across these ideas while editing the September 1839 issue of *Burton’s Gentlemen’s Magazine*, where Hall Grandgent’s review of the work of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries appears just after Poe’s story “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Grandgent poses Rafn et al.’s research controversially:

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We suppose that many persons will be greatly mortified to learn that America was discovered as early as the tenth century, which is several centuries previous to its discovery by Columbus. His fame is held so sacred by a portion of mankind that obstacles are thrown in the way of any attempt to prove it was visited long before his birth.<sup>10</sup>

The “mortifying” effect of prospective Viking discovery was much more complex than Grandgent suggests; its implications extended well beyond the romantic idealizing of Columbus to deep historical logics of civilization.

Annette Kolodny's history of the theory of Viking discovery, *In Search of First Contact* (2012), finds Rafn's theory instrumentalized in arguments about the primitivism of Native American indigenous peoples. In an 1841 essay entitled “The Discoveries of the Northmen,” William Gilmore Simms offers an especially egregious instance of this fantastical thinking:

A judicious artist would make a most romantic tale of that colony of Green Erin [on] the shores of Carolina and Georgia;—showing how, driven by stress of weather, and finding so lovely a land, greener than their own beloved Island, they pitched their tents for good:—how they built cities, how they flourished amid songs and dances; with now and then a faction fight by way of reminiscence:—how, suddenly, the fierce red men of the south-west came down upon them in howling thousands, captured their women, slaughtered their men, and drove them to their fortresses:—how they fought to the last, and perished to a man! And, in this history, you have the history of the Tumuli, the works of defence and worship—the thousand proofs with which our land is covered, of a genius and an industry immeasurably superior to any thing that the Indian inhabitants of this country ever attempted.<sup>11</sup>

Simms was not the only nineteenth-century American writer to credit the “Northmen” for the achievements of pre-Columbian civilizations.<sup>12</sup> According to Kolodny, this dubious and overblown fantasy of white European settlement served to distract white middle-class readers from the controversies around Jacksonian Indian removal policy in the South: “However disturbing the Trail of Tears and the ongoing Seminole Wars, Simms's article told of an earlier and even more horrific aggression.”<sup>13</sup> Kolodny also notices an historical anxiety about how Native peoples succeeded in repelling pre-Columbian European settlers—a haunting counterhistory for white intellectuals invested in colonialism as the prevailing spirit of progress and rationality. The resonance between the roar of the Maelström and the murmur of buffalo points to this recursive and pseudohistorical connection.

I submit that the Nordic setting of “A Descent into the Maelström” connects the drama of the tale to what Grandgent calls the “mortified” aspect of the white reading public of the antebellum decades. The Viking background gives a kind of millennial depth to the

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suggestive racialized fear that organized antebellum white people against black and Native populations. Readers steeped in narratives of the course of empires would have found much to think about in passages like the following:

Our progress downward, at each revolution, was slow, but very perceptible.

Looking about me upon the wide waste of liquid ebony on which we were thus borne, I perceived that our boat was not the only object in the embrace of the whirl. Both above and below us were visible fragments of vessels, large masses of building timber and trunks of trees, with many smaller articles, such as pieces of house furniture, broken boxes, barrels and staves. I have already described the unnatural curiosity which had taken the place of my original terrors. It appeared to grow upon me as I drew nearer and nearer to my dreadful doom. I now began to watch, with a strange interest, the numerous things that floated in our company. I *must* have been delirious—for I even sought *amusement* in speculating upon the relative velocities of their several descents toward the foam below. (M 2: 591)

Ratiocination, here as elsewhere in Poe, has side effects. The passage begins with a kind of boilerplate conservative theory of history: “Our progress downward, at each revolution, was slow but very perceptible.” The black and revolutionary Maelström smashes up the trappings of civilized domesticity.<sup>14</sup> However, Poe’s narrator, in taking an analytical and ironic perspective on his seemingly certain doom, ultimately arrives at the insight that saves him: he can rotate around the vortex longer if he attaches himself to a barrel rather than staying in the boat. Though his narrative is framed in fragmentary historical detail, the Norse fisherman’s survival depends on his studied detachment from the allegory of his situation and on his appreciation of the motion of bodies in space.

When the Norse fisherman’s ordeal is over, he returns unrecognizable to friends, who, because of his whitened hair, “knew me no more than they would have known a traveller from the spirit-land” (M 2: 594). What knowledge he has gained possesses little value, as he closes his tale concerned about its believability; he feels none of the consolation taken by the narrator of “MS. Found in a Bottle” (1833), who writes, “a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions, predominates even over my despair, and will reconcile me to the most hideous aspect of death” (M 2: 145). Poe takes this interest in knowledge and experience at the expense of the question of guilt that so preoccupies Coleridge. The fisherman offers little in the way of expiation throughout. He carefully notes that he and his brother did not bring along their children on their venture: “we had not the heart to let the young ones get into the danger” (M 2: 584). Yet he never mentions them at the end. Later as the ship is going down, when the narrator cannot convince his brother of his plan for survival, they decide wordlessly to part in a moment of absolute seafaring independence: “with a bitter struggle, I resigned him to his fate” (M 2: 593). In these moments, familial relations are dispatched so as to minimize the narrator’s guilt. And yet the loneliness and estrangement of his survival lead the artist Mr. Wyatt in “The

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Oblong Box" (1844) to drown himself in the wreck of the "Independence" with the body of his dead wife rather than face life without love (M 3: 922).

Shipwreck narratives like "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "The Oblong Box" also feature details that implicate them in the course of empires. In the first, the narrator sets out "from the port of Batavia, in the rich and populous island of Java" in a trading vessel laden with goods including "a few cases of opium" (M 2: 135). In the second, the "Independence" is a "packet-ship" traveling on scheduled service from Charleston to New York (M 3: 922). Such boats were a feature of the packet trade, a system of mail delivery held over from the British colonial system. Rather mysteriously, as the ship goes down, a "Mexican officer" and his family are among the passengers trying to escape (M 3: 931). This detail anticipates the conflict with Mexico that would define the end of the 1840s, and as we will see in the next section, Poe was certainly aware of the implication of current and former Spanish possessions in US imperial designs.<sup>15</sup> The temporal distortion of the survival story form produces even more urgency when transplanted to the Spanish context, in which his readers could contemplate an empire then in the process of crumbling.

## "The Pit and Pendulum": The Black Legend and the New de Soto

"The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842) has not attracted the attention of many historicist critics, and yet the setting is more explicitly historical than many of Poe's other short fictions. Its politics are superficially Bonapartist, from its epigraph, a Latin quatrain memorializing the mob violence of the French Revolution, to the culminating miraculous rescue of the narrator by General Lasalle of Napoleon's military. In between, however, the age of revolutions becomes a kind of formal exercise in cacophony and distortion; the narrator first describes his trial: "the sound of inquisitorial voices seemed merged in one dreamy indeterminate hum. It conveyed to my soul the idea of *revolution*—perhaps from its association in fancy with the burr of a mill wheel" (M 2: 681). This synaesthetic vortex resists the more referential inclinations of historicist criticism. Quickly, Poe turns to the racialized color symbolism that interests Morrison. The narrator grows deaf to the voices, but he makes out their figures: "I saw the lips of the black-robed judges. They appeared to me white—whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words" (M 2: 681). Here as in "Descent," the tale's miraculous resolution does little to quiet the racial paranoia that is its effect. The questions of empire raised by its transnational setting have even more direct bearing on antebellum US concerns.

María DeGuzmán's *Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire* (2005) takes up the cultural and political ramifications of the legacy of Spanish imperialism in US culture. DeGuzmán reads the judges as "figures of alien whiteness, or whiteness morally and physically blackened by the Black Legend against

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Spain.”<sup>16</sup> These “evil Spaniards,” she argues, “are conjured to press the narrative ego into a tight spot and then release him like a genie in a bottle, all the more potent for having been corked up into what first looked like certain annihilation.”<sup>17</sup> According to DeGuzmán, this process works in service of bolstering confidence in US empire by contrasting it with the declining Spanish. A number of Poe’s readers would disagree, however, and this section concludes by pointing to explicitly anticolonial and antiracist interpretations of the story.

From the outset, the tale’s compulsive interest in the construction of the dungeon resists narrative closure. The Spanish inquisitors anticipate the narrator’s modernizing rationality and his will to survive by conceiving his incarceration as a series of trials. Just as the narrator avoids one punishment, another emerges. It becomes increasingly clear that “the *sudden* extinction of life formed no part of their most horrible plan” (M 2: 687). The narrator realizes that the monks have incorporated his desire to escape into their plan: “It was *hope* that prompted the nerve to quiver—the frame to shrink” (M 2: 692). The Inquisitors signal this deferral of punishment in the allegorical images that adorn the ceiling of the prison: “In one of its panels a very singular figure riveted my whole attention. It was the painted figure of Time as he is commonly represented, save that, in lieu of a scythe, he held what, at a casual glance, I supposed to be the pictured image of a huge pendulum such as we see on antique clocks” (M 2: 689). Of course, this apparently decorative touch becomes an all-too-real swinging blade. The “monkish ingenuity in torture” moves between physical and psychological forms of punishment, elaborated both in the spatial construction of the chamber and the serial unfolding of the narrator’s sentence (M 2: 690). The temporal dimensions of torture here ultimately withhold the narrative relief that DeGuzmán suggests is the tale’s goal. Poe was less inclined than DeGuzmán suggests to ally himself with American progress in the face of European decline, and many of his readers have taken “The Pit and the Pendulum” to indicate the perversity of Poe’s identification with the Spanish.

William H. Prescott’s *The History of Ferdinand and Isabella*, which appeared in 1837, just a few years before “The Pit and the Pendulum,” provides an obvious window on Poe’s context, the nineteenth-century Spanish Inquisition. There, Prescott contends that the Inquisition “has probably contributed more than any other cause to depress the lofty character of the ancient Spaniard .... In the present liberal state of knowledge, we look with disgust at the pretensions of any human being, however exalted, to invade the sacred rights of conscience, inalienably possessed by every man.”<sup>18</sup> This sense of the Inquisition in opposition to “the present liberal state of knowledge” is a classic instance of the Black Legend of Spanish barbarism.<sup>19</sup> When Prescott returns to the Inquisition more than a decade later in his *History of the Reign of Philip the Second, King of Spain* (1855), he expressed this view even more forcefully:

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Folded under the dark wing of the Inquisition, Spain was shut out from the light which in the sixteenth century broke over the rest of Europe, stimulating the nations to greater enterprise in every department of knowledge. The genius of the people was rebuked and their spirit quenched, under the malignant influence of an eye that never slumbered, of an unseen arm ever raised to strike. How could there be freedom of thought, where there was no freedom of utterance? Or freedom of utterance, where it was as dangerous to say too little as too much? Freedom cannot go along with fear. Every way the mind of the Spaniard was in fetters.<sup>20</sup>

Prescott's light metaphor may well have been borrowed from Poe, whose story he would have read with interest. Poe's tale certainly shares with Prescott an interest in Spanish decline. Like Prescott, "The Pit and the Pendulum" turns judgment back on the judges and represents the perversity of human judgment in the name of God. However, Poe was rather less interested than Prescott in a progressive view of US rights discourse and US Protestantism as improvements on Spanish rule. Poe's narrative preoccupation with "monkish ingenuity in torture" draws his perspective backward into history in a different way than Prescott—the story is almost more inescapable than the dungeon it represents.

Jorge Luis Borges's oft-cited account of reading the story captures the effect of this confusion on the reader:

Hace casi setenta años sentado en el último peldaño de una escalera que ya no existe, leí *The Pit and the Pendulum*; he olvidado cuántas veces lo he releído o me lo he hecho leer; sé que no he llegado a la última y que regresaré a la cárcel cuadrangular que se estrecha y al abismo del fondo. [Nearly seventy years ago, sitting on the last step of a stairway that no longer exists, I read "The Pit and the Pendulum"; I have forgotten how many times I have reread it or had it read to me; I know that I have not yet arrived at the last and that I will return to the tightening four-sided prison and to the abyss of the deep.]<sup>21</sup>

The interpretive inexhaustibility of Poe's story, in this formulation, has partly to do with a suspension of the release DeGuzmán finds in its end. Prescott's liberal-progressive view of Spanish empire from afterward and outside has no place in this scene of reading. Just as the narrator thinks he has escaped his fate only to find himself in another trap, Borges the reader thinks he has escaped "The Pit and the Pendulum" only to be drawn back into its elaborate construction. Borges himself was hardly a postcolonial thinker, and yet his account of Poe's narrative entrapment echoes the afterlives of colonial rule itself, with its own imitative and repetitive functions, its own protean and iterative "ingenuity in torture."<sup>22</sup>

Much more explicitly than Borges, William Carlos Williams articulates the echoes between Poe and Spanish colonialism. In his 1925 book *In the American Grain*, Williams declared that "Poe was a new De Soto."<sup>23</sup> Seeking to associate Poe's formal innovations with the discoveries of the explorers, Williams emphasizes Poe's Americanism—his locality. In this view, Poe's glib borrowings from European culture paradoxically serve an

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absolutely original American literature, insofar as they indicate, above all, Poe's formal mastery in deploying them. The reference to the Spanish is not incidental however; earlier in the book, Williams offers a reading of the conquistadors as motivated by something like Poe's "imp of the perverse":

They moved out across the seas stirred by instincts, ancient beyond thought as the depths they were crossing, which they obeyed under the names of King or Christ or whatever it might be, while they watched the recreative New unfolding itself miraculously before them, before *them*, deafened and blinded.<sup>24</sup>

In Williams's reading, the "names" for the motivations of the conquistadors—"King or Christ or whatever it might be"—fall by the wayside en route to the miracle of the New World. "The Pit and the Pendulum" does not articulate the relation between the Inquisition and New World conquest, but no doubt similar "instincts" drive the "monkish ingenuity in torture."

Taken together, Borges's endless rereading of "The Pit and the Pendulum" and Williams's reading of Poe as a *conquistador* point toward a metahistorical Poe, whose vision mixes geopolitical, historical, allegorical, and psychological registers, while crucially resisting the standard form of historical narrative. The arrival of Lasalle at the tale's end might seem like a rousing endorsement of Franco-American republicanism. But its silliness as a narrative device—the way Poe makes this apparent triumph of liberty and human reason an obvious *deus ex machina*—belies the story's more reassuring notes. Why should the reader expect that the narrator is heading anywhere but into another hell of human making? What reckonings await the world after the Inquisition? Napoleon's invasion of Spain in 1808 led to decades of intermittent civil war on the Iberian Peninsula and the dismantling of substantial portions of the Spanish empire across the Americas. The immediate consequence of the Mexican War of Independence (1810–1821) was especially important as a precursor to US expansion across the Southwest. Poe may well have been thinking of the legacy of Spanish empire in the Texas Revolution (1835–1836) in his consideration of Inquisition justice.

In its intensity, the Poe of Borges and Williams *feels* more historical than narrative history. This effect has to do with Poe's interest in aesthetic immediacy, and with the perspectival estrangement of his narrators. In this respect, the historical dimensions of his stories have a strange analog in the work of the Egyptian historian in "Some Words with a Mummy" (1845), who has himself strategically revived centuries after his death to assess the truth of his work:

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He would invariably find his great work converted into a species of haphazard note-book—that is to say into a kind of literary arena for the conflicting guesses, riddles, and personal squabbles of whole herds of exasperated commentators. These guesses, etc., which passed under the name of annotations or emendations, were found so completely to have enveloped, distorted, and overwhelmed the text, that the author had to go about with a lantern to discover his own book. When discovered, it was never worth the trouble of the search. After re-writing it throughout, it was regarded as the bounden duty of the historian to work, immediately, in correcting from his own private knowledge and experience, the traditions of the day concerning the epoch at which he had originally lived. Now this process of re-scripture and personal rectification, pursued by various individual sages, from time to time, had the effect of preventing our history from degenerating into absolute fable. (M 3: 1189)

This procedure rectifies the problem of historical formalism by compounding historical relativism. Poe's aesthetic practice resembles this "galvanic" resurrection of past historians in its preoccupation with death—the morbid dangers experienced by his narrators give them a kind of otherworldly perspective on historical processes and an inveterate preoccupation with historical decline. Poe's historicity does not boil down to "one page" as in Byron, but rather gives concentrated visions of its "volumes vast" in a series of tales and poems meant to be read in one sitting. The encoding and decoding implied by the dynamic between history and allegory in Poe's work make for a kind of structurally imperfect system of aesthetic verification, in which the story of a Norse fisherman might represent the myth of Viking conquest, which might have to do with antebellum frontier violence, and the story of a prisoner of the Inquisition might represent an idealistic view of US Protestant rationality and liberalism, or it might represent US ambitions in the Southwest. Williams captured something about this in his assertion: "The whole period, America 1840, could be rebuilt, psychologically (phrenologically) from Poe's 'method.'"<sup>25</sup> Recall that the mummy, from his vantage point of entombed millennia, makes a case against the political organization of ancient Egypt that sounds eerily like the imperial ambitions of the 1840s United States, with its "consolidation of the thirteen states, with some fifteen or twenty others, into the most odious and insupportable despotism that ever was heard of upon the face of the Earth" (M 3: 1194).

"The Pit and the Pendulum" does not dwell on the light that breaks into the chamber with General Lasalle, but on the darkness into which the narrator is cast by an uncertain and only tenuously historical Inquisition. Its elaboration of "Time" works through the elaborate and unjustified mechanisms of punishment it describes. And yet, as DeGuzmán points out, it provides a narrative release explicitly associated with revolutionary liberalism. Taking the work as a theory of history would be a mistake—it is perhaps more properly understood as an aestheticizing of history, but at what cost?

### Conclusion

Reading “The Pit and the Pendulum” now calls up contemporary associations; justice perverted by the will to punish in the name of God might well describe a number of developments in recent American history. The so-called enhanced interrogation techniques used in the prosecution of the War on Terror, the panic about undocumented “bad hombres” swarming across the Mexican border, and the reign of extrajudicial murders by police in African American communities all suggest that the “imp of the perverse” has taken possession of the American idea of freedom. Likewise, “A Descent into the Maelström” now calls up the whirling vortex of human and natural history that is the late stages of the “Anthropocene”—a term with which Poe would have surely had some terrific fun. The racially and economically maldistributed effects of climate change have given his figuratively dark water a new charge, and increasingly haunted sites of environmental injustice like post-Katrina New Orleans, Flint, Michigan, post-Maria Puerto Rico, and Standing Rock augur for a new revolutionary Maelström, whose shape we cannot quite perceive and yet whose rush we hear like a herd of ghostly buffalo.

The dynamic between extreme individual experiences and the “course of empire” defines more of Poe’s work than can be covered in the span of a chapter. For instance, Poe’s poem “To Helen” appears to share this scheme, with the speaker recalling the beauty of his beloved while on a long journey:

On desperate seas long wont to roam,  
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,  
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home  
To the glory that was Greece,  
And the grandeur that was Rome. (M 1: 166)

These oft-cited lines frame the lyric argument of romantic yearning in terms of the dangers of maritime expedition and the pastoralism of civilizational nostalgia. Likewise, the preoccupation of many of Poe’s tales with civilizational decline involves the kind of poaching on “course of empires” discourse in ways I have examined here. One might wonder, for instance, whether the conclusion of “The Masque of the Red Death,” with its depiction of European degeneracy, reflects on Poe’s own “Gibbonish” tendencies: “And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all” (M 2: 677).

The warp and woof of individual experience and the course of empires reflect the complex spatial constructions of Poe’s tales. Haunted by the failed European settlement of the New World, the Maelström and the Pit destabilize the liberal perfectionism that undergirds US territorial ambitions. In a review of William Cullen Bryant’s *Poems* in the January 1837 issue of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe dismisses the didactic “analogy ... deduced from the eternal cycles of physical nature, to sustain a hope of *progression* in happiness” (ER: 412). His skepticism centers on the spurious assumptions about the dynamic between natural history and human history, and between the life of an

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individual and national history, what Sacvan Bercovitch calls “auto-American-biography.”<sup>26</sup> Instead, Poe offers us a picture of the psyche absolutely divided from its surroundings—in which nature, community, and law all threaten human flourishing. His aesthetic exploitation of the oblique relation between individual human effort and historical forces has an especially dramatic effect in the context of contemporary neoliberalism.<sup>27</sup>

The metahistorical Poe sketched out here points in various directions away from his own antebellum politics, both further back into history and ahead, toward the contemporary. His ironic sense of the rise of American civilization has proven enormously influential in a world more or less defined by American power and, recently, American decline. Writers from across the global South, and especially in trans-Atlantic contexts, have appropriated Poe's aesthetic procedures to a range of antiracist and anticolonial aesthetic projects. Frantz Fanon, for instance, offers a different frame for the historical-allegorical problem in Poe criticism with his account of the psychic conditions of colonialism. Fanon's notion of “epidermalization,” the process by which black skin becomes the locus of alienation, offers a kind of mirror reversal of Morrison's “American Africanism” as “a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire.”<sup>28</sup> Like Morrison, Fanon takes Poe as a paradigmatic example of the way white authorship can connote white anxiety. Reading Fanon alongside Morrison permits a generalization about the role of Poe's metahistorical aesthetic practice in antiracist thought: he provides a technical model for the manipulation of white anxiety.

Fanon mentions Poe as an example of the colonial cultural inheritance in his classic *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961):

Like adopted children who only stop investigating the new family framework at the moment when a minimum nucleus of security crystallizes in their psyche, the native intellectual will try to make European culture his own. He will not be content to get to know Rabelais and Diderot, Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe; he will bind them to his intelligence as closely as possible.<sup>29</sup>

This reference is not merely incidental. The ceaseless “investigating” of the “native intellectual” parallels that of Poe's obsessive narrators. Readers familiar with biographical criticism of Poe will also recognize in this passage the fundamental problem of his non-adoption by John Allan, and his primary estrangement from the Southern planter aristocracy. Given Poe's importance as a precursor for both psychoanalysis and *Negritude*, it is very likely that Fanon's own reading in the American author's work was more active, and less imitative, than the scene of reading he depicts here. Indeed, the pages that follow this reference read the development of colonial literature in ways that resonate with Poe's own sense of himself as a postcolonial author in the early decades of the Republic.

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Fanon's thinking, in its movement between focusing on the psychological predicament of the singular, generic "native" and, from a wider angle, depicting empire in decline, has a special resonance with the stories I have examined here:

Confronted with a world ruled by the settler, the native is always presumed guilty. But the native's guilt is never a guilt which he accepts; it is rather a kind of curse, a sort of sword of Damocles, for, in his innermost spirit, the native admits no accusation. He is overpowered but not tamed; he is treated as an inferior, but he is not convinced of his inferiority.<sup>30</sup>

In this formulation, the presumption of guilt operates as a mechanism of control that the native resists on the level of his "innermost spirit." As in Poe's stories of survival, the determination of the native's guilt has taken place elsewhere and has little bearing on his or her survival of the present conditions. This situation, though Fanon describes it as a structural, psychological form, also unfolds historically; following the logic of Hegelian dialectics, the native develops an increasingly revolutionary consciousness as his mistreatment inevitably intensifies. The contradictions of "a world ruled by the settler" will tend to produce revolutionary reaction. Fanon does not imagine this process as progressive or linear but instead describes the experience of time in the colonial relation as apocalyptic in its historical possibility: "The natives are convinced that their fate is in the balance, here and now. They live in an atmosphere of doomsday, and they consider that nothing ought to pass unnoticed."<sup>31</sup> Here too we find an uncanny parallel with Poe's narrators, who find themselves in situations of such extremity that each moment becomes an eternity. The hypertensive vigilance of Poe's white male narrators becomes in Fanon a theory of the psychodynamics of colonial domination.

In the prophetic conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon offers a gnomic account of US empire as recapitulating the imitativeness of the colonial encounter: "Two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness, and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions."<sup>32</sup> Both the Gothicism of this passage and its sense of American culture as stuck in a pathological thrall to Europe sound like Poe. The point of saying so is not to credit Poe with influencing Fanon. The echoes of Poe in Fanon pose a challenge to historicist aesthetics on the question of race and empire as trans-historical forms. Both Poe and Fanon find the long-duration facts of colonialism animating the most intensely felt moments of individual experience. As the sword of time swings closer and the waves rise, we wonder, in our respective stony cells and creaky ships, whether the end of American empire will take us down with it. And like Borges, we read Poe over and over again, feeling ever closer but never quite reaching the end.

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### Notes:

(1) Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 68.

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<sup>(2)</sup> See Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) for nineteenth-century history and narrative form. See also Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) for a reading of long-durational history as a foil to American exceptionalism.

<sup>(3)</sup> The authorship of this unsigned text is contested. Appearing in the February 15, 1845, issue a week before Poe officially became editor, it is not attributed to Poe in Burton Pollin, ed., *The Collected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol. 3, Writings in The Broadway Journal: Nonfictional Prose—Part I: Text* (New York: Gordian Press, 1986). Despite its resonance with his positions on aesthetics as stated elsewhere, Poe himself attributes it to Charles F. Briggs, one of the founders of *The Broadway Journal*, in "The Literati of New York City" (from the May 1846 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book*), where he claims, "there was scarcely a point in his whole series of criticisms on this subject at which I did not radically disagree with him" (ER: 1133).

<sup>(4)</sup> Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in *Lord Byron: The Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 179, Canto IV, stanza 108.

<sup>(5)</sup> Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, 179.

<sup>(6)</sup> Jonathan Arac finds Poe writing travesties of "personal narrative" in *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820–1860* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). For Poe in relation to the nineteenth-century American fascination with death, see J. Gerald Kennedy's *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987). See also Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), Karen Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), and Russ Castronovo's *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

<sup>(7)</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 52. Both Joseph Frank, in *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), and Frederic Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 420, contend that "spatial form" involves a flattening of historical consciousness. Poe manipulates this flatness to produce historical-aesthetic effects.

<sup>(8)</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford, 2008), 68.

<sup>(9)</sup> Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," 68.

<sup>(10)</sup> Hall Grandgent, "Discovery of America by the Northmen in the Tenth Century," *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine and American Monthly Review* 5, no. 3 (September 1839): 153.

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(<sup>11</sup>) William Gilmore Simms, "The Discoveries of the Northmen," *Magnolia; or Southern Monthly* 3, no. 9 (1841): 421.

(<sup>12</sup>) In "The Prairies" (1833), William Cullen Bryant imagines an independent race of mound-builders distinct from and prior to the familiar Native peoples of North America: "The red man came—/ The roaming hunter tribes, warlike and fierce,/ And the mound-builders vanished from the earth" (*Poems* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1837], 52). Bryant's vision, however, predates the popularity of the myth of Viking contact that determines Simms's fantasy. Poe took note of "The Prairies" in his review of 1837 review of Bryant's *Poems* in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, but only addresses its metrical choices, not its historical projections (ER: 422–423).

(<sup>13</sup>) Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact: The Vikings of Vinland, the Peoples of the Dawnland, and the Anglo-American Anxiety of Discovery* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 129.

(<sup>14</sup>) Kristin Ross points to instances of this figure across the "centrifugal" poetics of Arthur Rimbaud, who she contends was inspired by the turning out of the bourgeois interior in the barricades of the Paris Commune in her *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (New York: Verso, 1988), 10.

(<sup>15</sup>) See Bonnie Shannon McMullen, "Lifting the Lid on Poe's 'Oblong Box,'" *Studies in American Fiction* 23, no. 2 (Autumn 1995): 203–214.

(<sup>16</sup>) DeGuzmán, *Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo American Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 34. Robert Reid Pharr's *Archives of Flesh: African America, Spain, and Post-Humanist Critique* (New York: New York University Press, 2016) informs my perspective here. See also Cedric Robinson on the Spanish and Portuguese plantation systems in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983).

(<sup>17</sup>) DeGuzmán, *Spain's Long Shadow*, 39.

(<sup>18</sup>) William H. Prescott, *The History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella*, 2 vols. (New York: A.L. Burt, 1838), 1:190.

(<sup>19</sup>) It has long been customary to note the importance to Poe of the English translation of Juan Antonio Llorente's *History of the Spanish Inquisition* (New York: G.C. Morgan, 1826). By contrast, Prescott's interpretation is explicitly Americanist.

(<sup>20</sup>) William H. Prescott, *History of the Reign of Philip the Second, King of Spain*, 3 vols. (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1855), 1:446.

(<sup>21</sup>) Borges, "Prólogo," in *Edgar Allan Poe, La carta robada*, ed. Franco Maria Ricci (Madrid: Siruela, 1985), 12–13. Translation from Emron Esplin, *The Influence and*

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*Reinvention of Edgar Allan Poe in Spanish America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016), 62.

(<sup>22</sup>) Marie Bonaparte interprets “The Pit and the Pendulum” through the contrast of a “phantasy of the return to the womb” and “the son’s homosexual and masochistic passivity to the father” (*The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation*, trans. John Rodker [London: Imago, 1949], 584). She finds “the vast, primary problem of the origin of anxiety” below this opposition (584). DeGuzmán rereads these psychosexual dynamics as a reflection on Spanish “amalgamation” (*Spain’s Long Shadow*, 25–47). See also Leland Person, “Poe’s Philosophy of Amalgamation: Reading Racism in the Tales,” in *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 205–224.

(<sup>23</sup>) William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 2009), 220.

(<sup>24</sup>) Williams, *In the American Grain*, 27.

(<sup>25</sup>) Williams, *In the American Grain*, 231.

(<sup>26</sup>) Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1975), 134.

(<sup>27</sup>) For Poe and liberalism, see Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman’s collection *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), especially Jonathan Elmer’s “Terminate or Liquidate? Poe, Sensationalism, and the Sentimental Tradition,” 91–120. Poe’s definition of plot as a bid for structural perfection doubles as a critique of liberal perfectionism. In the “Marginalia” of November 1844, Poe writes:

The pleasure which we derive from any exertion of human ingenuity, is in direct ratio of the *approach* to this species of reciprocity between cause and effect. In the construction of *plot*, for example, in fictitious literature, we should aim at so arranging the points, or incidents, that we cannot distinctly see, in respect any one of them, whether that one depends from any one other, or upholds it. In this sense, of course, perfection of plot is unattainable, *in fact*,—because Man is the constructor. The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is the plot of God. (ER: 1315)

Poe refers to a quality in nature he calls “the complete *mutuality* of adaptation” in which cause and effect are perfectly synchronized; he gives the example of importance of high fat foods in wintry climates and the abundance of high fat creatures like seals and whales in those same regions. Human systems lack this “reciprocity,” as he calls it, by dint of their imperfection. Liberalism is one of the most important imperfect plots of man in American life.

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(<sup>28</sup>) Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 11; Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 38.

(<sup>29</sup>) Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 218-219.

(<sup>30</sup>) Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 53.

(<sup>31</sup>) Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 81.

(<sup>32</sup>) Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 313.

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