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“Poe’s Poor Devils”

Since Edgar Allan Poe’s work is generally associated with crime, horror, and the macabre, one might reasonably expect to find the devil in it. There are in fact two stories with the word “devil” in their titles, “Devil in the Belfry” (1839) and “Never Bet the Devil Your Head” (1841), and two more that feature Satan as protagonist, or more accurately, antagonist: “Bon-Bon” (1832) and “Le Duc de L’Omelette” (1832).¹ Finally, there is a short “arabesque” about a Demon, “Silence—A Fable” (1932).² All date from Poe’s earliest work, and, with the possible exception of the latter, all are satires, as can be guessed from their titles. The Devil essentially disappears from Poe’s later work except as an occasional figure of speech.³ Although the Devil was a popular subject for stories in Poe’s time, he had come down in the world considerably from when the Puritans imagined he reigned over the entire continental wilderness. In antebellum fiction, the Devil is often frustrated by quick-witted Americans, and Poe’s devils are similarly unlucky at least half the time. In addition to being physically comic, either very short or very tall and shabbily or oddly dressed, they are often handicapped, with a limp or

¹ Some readers have taken the “imp” in “The Imp of the Perverse” as a kind of devil, but the story makes clear that the “imp” is not a real demon but a trope for the narrator’s repressed conscience. Similarly, the animal described in “The Black Cat” is diabolical mainly from the disturbed and unreliable narrator’s point of view. In both of these cases, the point is to show how narrators attempt to externalize evil impulses that are generated by their own diseased minds.

² “Arabesque” is Poe’s term for the early stories he wrote in an Oriental pastiche style, many of which were published in the 1840 collection, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*.

³ Of which probably the most famous and memorable is in “The Raven” (1845), where the bird is compared to a “fiend” and his eyes to a “demon’s that is dreaming” (PT 86). The last stanza reveals however that the raven itself is only a conceit for the grief of the speaker.

glasses. Poe's devils are also often linked to money: they are either poor or associated with gambling or confidence men. Not only does Poe's Devil need to hustle to for his livelihood, failing to secure his desired victim as often as not, but he actually assumes the aspect of an underdog at times. In fact, Poe makes the Devil into a distinctly ambivalent figure, and one that seems to represent at times a key facet of himself: a poor writer. This final point can help us read a story that has often proved as puzzling as it is haunting to readers, the oneiric fantasy piece, "Silence—A Fable," which I will argue is as close to Milton's Satan as an antebellum devil comes.

The Devil fell on hard times in antebellum America for a number of reasons, including a rise in secularism as well as Romantic and Transcendentalist strains of Christianity which depicted God as an amorphous spirit and read the Bible in very metaphorical terms.⁴ Rather than an omnipotent father-figure with his eternally damned adversary, God was often figured more as an animating force of Nature and evil as stemming from a defect in human psychology. Although certain churches may have still preached hellfire and damnation, many educated Americans leaned towards more abstract religious imagery such as that developed by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In "The Over-Soul" (1841), Emerson describes the universe as a self-regulating system in which man lives as a succession of particles containing within themselves the eternal soul that unites them with each other and the whole. Poe's own "Eureka" (1848) propounds a similar cosmology, depicting the universe as a force-field defined by attraction and repulsion, in which living beings are the "infinite individuations" of a "Divine Being, who thus passes

⁴ For a more detailed recent account of the Devil's decline in American cultural history, see Andrew Delbanco's *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (1995), which traces the evolution of the idea of Satan and evil from the Puritans to the present, arguing that by the late eighteenth century Satan had become a comic character.

his Eternity in perpetual variation of Concentrated Self and almost Infinite Self-Diffusion” (*Poetry and Tales* 1358). “Eureka” is considered by some as a hoax, and the possibility of hoaxing must be allowed for virtually everything Poe ever wrote, but by the same token, nothing that Poe wrote is ever *only* a hoax, and “Eureka” certainly bears the earmarks of a plausible Romantic metaphysical vision. If so, the question of evil has clearly been evacuated from Poe’s spiritual landscape, as it was from Emerson’s. A survey of crimes and evil-doings in Poe’s fiction, which certainly are not lacking, suggests that for Poe evil is usually a question of human pathology. Many crimes are committed for greed, some for revenge, others stem from some fixation or obsession, but their perpetrators often share a common trait: a lack of conscience or moral sensibility. Their motives may be commonplace or mad, but what makes them different is the lack of a moral sense to restrain them. Antebellum moral psychology posited the conscience or moral sense as a distinct mental faculty, subject to health or decline depending upon how often it was exercised, and Poe’s amoral criminals in tales such as “The Tell-Tale Heart” or “William Wilson” are illustrations of what the absence of conscience would produce: a sociopath.⁵ In the dichotomy of traditional explanations for evil suggested by Neil Forsyth, “grandeur or nothingness,” Poe’s malefactors all clearly fall on the side of nothingness (“Evil and Literature” 1). Evil is the absence of good (literally, the absence of a sound conscience) rather than a force stemming from a diabolical agent.

⁵ For instance, one of the first major American tracts on moral philosophy, written in 1835 by Francis Wayland, President of Brown University, devotes five chapters to conscience but figures it as helpless to do anything but advise (*The Elements of Moral Science* 49). Wayland repeatedly stresses the importance of “hearkening” and “obeying” the “impulses” of conscience since the conscience is strengthened or atrophied, like a muscle, by use or disuse. Moreover, not only can individuals weaken and destroy their conscience by failing to obey it, but entire communities can collectively deaden and lose their moral sense by repeated acts of cruelty or violence. Citing gladiatorial Rome and revolutionary France as examples of societies which became sadistic after tolerating spectacles of violence, Wayland argues failure to heed conscience on a collective level produces a collective loss of moral sensibility.

It is hardly surprising then that Poe's devils are all comic characters and unimposing even by modest antebellum standards (I will speak later of Poe's "Demon," the one exception). For the sake of comparison, we can think of Washington Irving's "Old Scratch" in "The Devil and Tom Walker" (1824), a great swarthy brute who finally succeeds in carrying off both Tom Walker and his termagant wife (though handfuls of coarse black hair found in the woods suggest that he has to exert himself considerably). Stephen Vincent Benet's story, "The Devil and Daniel Webster" (1836), also depicts the Devil as very tall and dark, though the hue refers more to his elegant clothes than his sooty face. For all his imposing looks, however, Benet's Devil fails in his attempt to collect a contracted soul, foiled by Daniel Webster's eloquent appeal before the Devil's rigged jury.

Similarly, Poe's devils often fail to acquire their intended sinner. Only in "Never Bet the Devil Your Head" does the Devil acquire the item in question, i.e., Toby Dammit's head. Yet, since the story's elaborate puns suggest that Toby is a dog as well as a man, it would seem that the Devil has not won anything of much value. Moreover, this one successful Devil has nothing of the stature and mien of Irving's or even Benet's devils. Instead, he is a "little lame old gentleman" in a black suit, clean shirt, and white cravat (*Poetry and Tales* 464). Resembling a priest in appearance and humble demeanor, the Devil's hands are even "clasped pensively on his stomach" and his two eyes are "carefully rolled up into the top of his head" (a very odd description, if one tries to picture it; 464). The final comic touch on this distinctly emasculated figure is his hair "parted in front like a girl's" (464). His black silk apron also feminizes his appears while

anticipating the gruesome ending where he exits “limping off at the top of his speed” with Dammit’s severed head (466).

The less lucky Devil of “Bon-Bon” also resembles “an ecclesiastic” in his black clothes and white cravat (though this one is “filthy”), but is tall and “exceedingly lean” with tight-fitting clothes too small for his frame and “very much in the style of a century ago” (170). The narrator’s additional remark that his thread-bare clothes were “evidently . . . intended for a much shorter person” even suggests that they may be second-hand, as do his mismatched shoes, on which a pair of “very brilliant buckles gave the lie to the extreme poverty of the other portions of his dress” (170). In short, it almost seems that this humble-looking Devil cobbles his costume together from his victims (which seem, moreover, few and far apart judging from his old-fashioned clothes). Though scraggly, the Devil in “Bon-Bon” looks like the part of an eccentric scholar, a kind of Ichabod Crane, with a bald head, long pony-tail (“*queue* of considerable length”), and green spectacles with side glasses, which turn out to hide a “dead level of flesh” beneath (173). And a scholar he is indeed, as he reveals that he has been furnishing ideas to philosophers throughout the ages as well as dining on their souls (which apparently are not only mortal and material but come in a variety of flavors).

The Devil in another French satire, “The Duc de l’Omelette,” is slightly more majestic but even less dignified and detailed. We learn only that the pale personage who introduces himself as “Baal-Zebub, Prince of the Fly” reclines on an ottoman, sipping wine, and remains as still as if “carved in marble” (145). Yet, despite the paucity of physical detail, and despite being on his underworld home territory, this Devil too is rendered ridiculous. For one thing, he is perhaps the only character in Poe’s entire oeuvre

to suffer sexual embarrassment. When the Duc's survey of the sumptuous apartment discovers a small sandal-footed statue with a "taper ankle" entirely covered by a veil, he raises his eyes and catches "his Satanic Majesty—in a blush" (145). Although Poe has been mercilessly raked over by critics for evidence of incest and other perversions, a scrupulous examination of his work reveals that there is very little overt reference to sex, desire, or sensuality, making this allusion to the Devil's discomfort only more striking. Further accentuating his seeming ineffectuality is the fact that the Devil needs to ask the Duc to undress whereas the Duc repeatedly refuses. Moreover, the Devil's admiring references to the Duc's sumptuous pantaloons and *robe-de-chambre* raise the suspicion, especially given the ill-matched wardrobe of the Devil in "Bon-Bon," that this sensual Satan wants the Duc to strip in order to filch his clothes as much as to roast him. However, the most pitiable, not to say ironic, thing about this Devil, who is even more ludicrous than the silly Duc himself, is that he turns out to be merely a character in a book: *Diable* by Abbé Gaultier. The Duc, having read this book, knows that the Devil cannot refuse a game of cards, and indeed, the Devil agrees to the Duc's challenge as if determined by his literary script. The Duc then promptly wins his freedom by cheating: "the Duc slips a card" while his Majesty is "taking wine" (*Poetry and Tales* 146). Although there is an American tradition of imagining the Devil outwitted by American ingenuity, Poe's Devil in "The Duc de l'Omelette" is not much of an adversary.

It is in fact one of the main jokes of these two tales of Frenchified luxury that the Devil ends up with nothing. In the first story, he is "chagrined" to discover he has lost the Duc, while in "Bon-Bon" he declines to accept the philosopher's offer for a bargain, offering several different reasons, including "lack of funds on hand" and a reluctance to

take advantage of Bon-Bon's drunkenness. It is a puzzling conclusion and no critic has convincingly explained why the Devil departs empty-handed, but the Devil's poverty and lack of adequate provisions in Hell are alluded to a number of times. Whatever the reason, the Devil seems no more master of this situation than the frustrated dupe in "The Duc de l'Omelette." Far from dominating the diminutive philosopher and *restaurateur*, the Devil is often discomfited by Bon-Bon's swearing, and is subject to uncontrollable sneezing and tail-wagging, a circumstance that Bon-Bon finds "extremely indecent" (*Poetry and Tales* 177). In short, both Devils in these two French satires are poor devils indeed.

Finally, there is the "very diminutive foreign-looking young man" in "The Devil in the Belfry," who capers into a well-ordered and secluded little town and creates pandemonium by ringing the bell thirteen times. Unlike the previous three Devils, who were pale, this impudent dandy has a "snuff" colored face, long hooked nose, "mustachios and whiskers," and is "grinning from ear to ear" (*Poetry and Tales* 303). Moreover, he is dressed ostentatiously with *papillotes* in his hair and black "tight-fitting swallow-tailed coat" and stockings and black satin ribbon bows and a huge *chapeau-de-bras* (303). As Marshall Clayton points out, this dapper Devil is made to look like a diddler or con-man, anticipating the extended treatment of this motif in Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*. Literally dancing about, though out of time, this dandified villain cuts a ludicrous figure because of his overdressed appearance and undisguised aggression (he beats the belfry-man). Clayton argues that this story is one of several in which Poe satirically denounces the "pervasive confidence game" that masked

the violence and inhumane freneticism (the so-called “rush of the age”) of the new economy (“Stealing Time” 260).

All four comic tales, in fact, allude somehow to the urban free-market economy that dominated American public debate and consciousness in the 1820s and 30s. Since gambling was a common trope to describe the economics of Wall Street and the stock market, it is no accident that both devils in “The Duc de l’Omelette” and “Never Bet the Devil Your Head” are associated with games of chance. However, if the dandified devil in “The Devil in the Belfry” seems to be a harbinger of the new frenetic economy, the devils in the other three stories seem quaintly old-fashioned in their business methods: unhurried, rule-bound, honorable and ultimately unsuccessful.

Taking the devil in “Bon-Bon” as a case in point, we can notice that he is in fact the unacknowledged author of several philosophical works, claiming to have written all of Epicurus and supplied Plato with a “fundamental doctrine in his metaphysics” (*Poetry and Tales* 175). In fact, considering that Bon-Bon and the Devil are doubles for each other in the sense that both are writers, philosophers and connoisseurs of fine wine and food, it is the Devil who suffers from the comparison. While Bon-Bon is evidently rich and has published many books and runs a successful restaurant, the Devil is exceedingly poor, shabbily dressed and departs empty-handed. Of course, one cannot trust appearances with the Devil, but it is clear nonetheless that Poe’s Devil is neither the clever shape-shifter that Melville imagined nor the frightening adversary of other literary manifestations (even Irving’s and Benet’s devils are both dangerous and unpleasant).

Readers familiar with Poe’s non-fiction will know that Poe’s favorite expression for the exploited and impoverished writer, the quintessential victim of the chance-ruled

capitalist marketplace, was “poor devil author” (probably after Irving’s 1924 story “The Poor Devil Author,” which satirized the financial difficulties of a naïve younger writer). Entirely dependent for his living on his work as a writer and reviewer, Poe keenly felt the powerlessness of writers in a literary marketplace controlled by all-powerful editors and publishers. Not only did America lack a serious copyright law, but also lacked clear ethical standards for paying writers promptly and fairly. As a result, writers were often paid paltry sums or long after publication, and abuses were commonplace. In “Some Secrets of the Magazine Prison-House” (1845), Poe adopts the uncharacteristic rhetoric of melodrama in order to lament the fate of a young author who works for a whole month on article solicited by an editor who then delays paying him for nearly a year, during which time the “poor devil author” dies of starvation (*Essays and Reviews* 1038). In a short article of 1100 words, Poe uses the term “poor devil” no less than seven times to refer to the struggling young writer. Though Poe insists that he does not write from personal experience, his letters and biography reveal that Poe and his wife were in fact hungry and cold more than once.

Thus, although Bon-Bon and the Duc are both writers, these two wealthy *bon vivants* are in no wise figures for the kind of writer that Poe was or cared about. In fact, to whatever extent it makes sense to speak of identification in these comic pieces, one would have to acknowledge that Poe’s sympathies lie more with the Devil in “Bon-Bon” than with the human protagonist in any of these stories. As I mentioned earlier, the philosophical Devil of that short story is the unacknowledged author of many important works or at least ideas of Western philosophy. As critics have often noted, Poe was obsessed with plagiarism and the idea that he had no control over his words once they

were in print. In this respect, the hungry and seemingly honorable devil in that story seems uncannily to function as a figure for the frustrated writer that Poe was.

This brings me to the last and strangest of the five devil stories Poe wrote. “Silence—A Fable” was originally meant to be included in the Folio Club collection, a group of sixteen tales which Poe hoped to publish together with satirical commentary and which were purportedly written by members of a club devoted to good food, good wine and good fiction, i.e. the fictional Folio Club. Since no publisher agreed to publish the whole, Poe placed the eleven stories he had written of the intended sixteen in various magazines. Thus, each of these pieces (including “Silence,” “Bon-Bon” and “The Duc de l’Omelette”) are meant to be linked to a member of the Club, described in a framing prologue and which includes characters such as “De Rerum Natura” and “Horrible Dictu.” Although the names are comic, the stories have not been necessarily read as parodies. For example, these Folio tales include “M.S. Found in a Bottle” (attributed to Mr. Solomon Seadrift) and “The Assignation” (originally called “The Visionary” and attributed to *Convolvulus Gondola*), both of which are commonly read as more or less “straight.” Thus, the question naturally arises of whether to read “Silence—A Fable” as a parody or merely a pastiche of Romantic Orientalism. This bizarre and imagistic tale of a Demon and a man in a bleakly surrealistic landscape has comic touches but is also oddly haunting. Ultimately, everything Poe wrote has an element of burlesque running through it which does not necessarily detract from taking it seriously. Like other Romantics, Poe used irony and humor in order to interject an element of rhetorical instability and irresolvable playfulness into his work, but these comic notes are meant to mingle with

and not smother other emotional and aesthetic effects. Thus, “Silence—A Fable” can be read, in my view, as both silly and serious at the same time.

Moreover, the story is particularly interesting for its oddly personal dimension. Its original title was “Siope—A Fable,” where “Siope” is generally identified as an anagram for “is Poe” as well as Greek for “silence.” It also had a subtitle: “A Fable, in the Manner of the Psychological Autobiographists,” suggesting that it should be read as a psychological sketch (if not of Poe, then at least of a Folio Club member, though critics disagree whether the author should be considered the anonymous narrator of the Folio Club frame narrative or an unnamed “very little man in a black coat with very black eyes,” a description that suggests the writer is the devil himself [*Poetry and Tales* 132]). A “fable” is a didactic story often featuring an anthropomorphized animal, which is perhaps one way to think of a “demon,” but Poe may also have been thinking of Milton’s use of the term at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, where Satan is compared to other creatures named in various “Fables.”⁶ Milton uses the term “fable” once more in Book 2 when he describes hell by comparing its unnatural landscape and residents to the Gorgons and Chimeras of myth (PL 2. 628-9). In repeatedly using the word “fable” for these narratives, Milton seems to be insisting on this genre as privileged literary antecedent for

⁶ The line reads:

“Thus Satan talking to his nearest Mate
With Head up-lift above the wave, and Eyes
That sparkling blaz’d, his other Parts besides
Prone on the Flood, extended long and large
Lay floating many a rood, in bulk as huge
As whom the Fables name of monstrous size,
Titanian, or *Earth-Born*, that warr’d on *Jove*,
Briarios or *Typhon*, whom the Den
By ancient *Tarsus* held, or that Sea-beast
Leviathan, which God of all his works
Created hugest that swim th’ Ocean stream:
. . . So stretcht out huge in length the Arch-fiend lay . . .”
(*Paradise Lost* I. 187-209).

descriptions of creatures like Satan, which Poe, always a careful reader, seems to follow. The phrase “psychological autobiographists” Poe borrowed from Benjamin Disreili’s *Contarini Fleming, A Psychological Auto-Biography* (1832), an account of Disreili’s mental breakdown and subsequent travels, including to Egypt and other Near Eastern lands. Critics have read “Silence” as a parody of Disreili as well as of Edward Bulwer and Thomas De Quincey and other “transcendental” orientalists, but have disagreed about the degree to which the tale should be read *only* as a satire. Described by Clark Griffith as a “ruthless parody” of Transcendentalism, the tale is read by G.R. Thompson as a merely “exaggerated” representation of Poe’s “poetic world” (Clark, “Poe’s ‘Ligeia’” 72; Thompson, “‘Silence’” 23). Similarly, Benjamin Fisher argues on the basis of Poe’s various revisions of the story that each rewriting tended to “strengthen its serious implications and mute its satiric overtones,” and concludes that the story is an “intense drama of the self” (“The Power of Words” 66).

Keeping in mind that “Silence” invites an “autobiographical” reading, it is interesting to note that there are two narrators, a frame narrator and a Demon, whose embedded tale takes up most of the story and makes a far more compelling claim on the reader’s sympathy than the frame narrator.⁷ This Demon is not exactly the Christian Devil, since the world of the story is explicitly Muslim and alludes to Allah and a “dreary region in Libya,” yet he clearly bears traces of the ambivalent Satan that emerges from *Paradise Lost*. Just as Milton’s Satan spies upon Adam and Eve in order “To mark what of thir state he more might learn,” the Demon spies upon a lone man, testing and

⁷ One of the rare recent critical readings of the story, by Richard Benton, identifies the Demon as Poe’s “artistic self” and the solitary man as Poe’s “ordinary self,” but there is no internal evidence for such an allegory (“The Tales: 1831-1835” 123). As I will argue in this last section of my essay, only the Demon seems to be a plausible figure for Poe.

observing his reactions. He is enigmatic, supernaturally powerful, and yet oddly pitiable. Above all, like Milton's Satan, he is eloquent and his narrative dominates the story as a whole. Beginning with an emphatic "Listen to *me*," the Demon places his hand upon the head of the frame narrator and literally holds his attention throughout the duration of the telling (*Poetry and Tales* 221). A poet as much as a story-teller, he recounts his tale in a highly structured and incantatory way, repeating the following refrain:

And I lay close within my covert and observed the actions of the man. And the man trembled in the solitude;--but the night waned and he sat upon the rock.
(*Poetry and Tales* 212).

The repetition of conjugations gives the story a distinctly spoken effect, as if a product of an oral culture rather than a literary one, as does the repetition (four times) of the line. In fact, many critics refer to the piece as a prose-poem rather than a tale. The authorial position of the Demon is further underscored by the frame narrator's reaction to the story, which, like a critic, is to comment on its quality as a narrative rather than its content. Comparing it to the "fine tales in the volumes of the Magi," and the "sayings of the Sybils," the frame narrator finally exclaims that "the fable that the demon told me as he sat by my side in the shadow of the tomb, I hold to be the most wonderful of all!" (*Poetry and Tales* 224). In other words, the Demon's first and primary identity in the story is that of a poet-storyteller or fabulist, suggesting that it is he and not the frame narrator nor world-weary man who should be read as a reflection of Poe.

Moreover, recalling the title of another of Poe's stories, "The Power of Words," the Demon's words are depicted as having an impressive performative power: his curses create a terrible storm and then a terrifying silence which finally frightens the man into fleeing (though in a self-parodic touch typical of Poe's work, the Demon's first act is to

make some “hippopotami” roar loudly). The Demon’s efforts here recall Poe’s own writing, since Poe’s objective typically is to frighten or startle his reader with some sensational description or revelation, further suggesting that the Demon can be read as an alter-ego for Poe himself.

Yet, in spite of the Demon’s impressive oral skills, if we may so call them, he has no direct agency over the *written* words that appear on a giant tablet-like gray rock: first DESOLATION and then SILENCE. Although these words describe his world, even changing in order to follow suit to his actions (e.g. when he creates silence, the word on the rock changes to SILENCE), the Demon does not write them. In fact, he cannot even read them at first. This strange impotence gives the demon an oddly vulnerable position in the desolate world that seems otherwise to be under his control. In this respect, then, the Demon resembles the somewhat frustrated devils of the other stories, both an author and yet a merely a character in a story written by someone else (possibly the invisible agency responsible for the writing on the rock), and in this case, even *about* someone else. For the Demon’s tale finally is not about himself but about the world-weary man who appears on top of the engraved rock. The Demon’s attitude toward this man is all envious admiration, and he compares his features to that of a “deity,” recalling Satan’s amazement at the “divine resemblance” of the “gentle pair” inhabiting Eden (*Poetry and Tales* 222; *Paradise Lost* IV.364-366). Also like Milton’s Satan, who hides among the animals to watch Adam and Eve, Poe’s Demon conceals himself among the water lilies and hippopotami in order to spy upon the man. By conjuring a series of provocations for him, the Demon gives the man the role of hero in the narrative, himself assuming the position of mere antagonist. Thus, the Demon is in all these respects a strangely

diminished figure in spite of the fact that he tells the story himself. He is not so much a tempter as a trickster, and his story about furtive spying from among the water lilies upon the toga-wearing man is at least as sad as it is silly, alluding as it does to a profound and permanent isolation. Thus, in a typically post-Miltonic gesture, Poe renders his Demon sympathetic by making him not only the speaker of a long and eloquent soliloquy but making him appear as the lonely victim condemned to a strange and solitary hell by a vastly superior being.

And the world that the Demon describes is indeed both haunting and hellish. He calls it a “dreary region in Libya,” but it is clearly a Libya only of the mind.⁸ The landscape is not natural or even exotic; it is a vision of a modern nihilistic hell. Recalling Milton’s description of hell as a place “where peace/And rest can never dwell,” the Demon insists most upon the fact that there is “neither quiet nor silence” in this region, repeating this phrase twice in the first paragraphs (*Paradise Lost* I.65-6, *Poetry and Tales* 221). In addition to the unnatural “rustling and loud noise” of the clouds, there is a yellow river which “palpitates forever and forever beneath the red eye of the sun with a tumultuous and convulsive motion” (*Poetry and Tales* 222). On either side of this yellow river is a “pale desert” (again recalling Milton’s “pale” and dreadful “dreary plain” [*Paradise Lost* I.180-183]) of gigantic “everlasting” water-lilies. The region is bounded by a “dark, horrible, lofty forest” and a “fiery wall” on the horizon, towards which gray clouds “rush westward forever” even though there is no wind. It is night-time and raining as the Demon’s tale begins, and as in a surrealistic horror film, he describes the rain

⁸ The modern nation of Libya did not exist in the nineteenth century, and the word was used for North Africa in general. The text situates the “dreary region in Libya” by the “borders of the river Zaire,” which is the former name of the Congo River in Western Central Africa. In other words, the place described by the Demon is meant to be located in Africa, but again, I would insist that this is an Africa of the imagination more than anything else.

turning to blood as it falls upon his head. The moon rises and shines a crimson light upon the desolate landscape, again recalling Milton's "dreary plain, . . . /voyd of light/Save what the glimmering of these livid flames/Casts pale and dreadful" (PL I.180-83). This dim red landscape, both intensely artificial and profoundly psychological, is one of the nineteenth century's most hauntingly vivid depictions of hell.

However, the hell that is finally evoked here is not the noisy pandemonium of tradition (and the beginning of the story) but a modern hell of nothingness, meaninglessness, and solitude as the Demon's final torment of the man is to curse his world into silence and stillness. This is what drives the man to shudder and flee, "wan with terror," after listening and discovering "there was no voice in the illimitable desert" (223). With this image, Poe returns to the poetic world of his early poem, "Al Aaraaf," an arabesque narrative poem of lovers who are banned from Heaven for not having responded to a call to perform God's work. In that poem, it is the "eternal voice of God . . . passing by" which stills the "realms on high" into a profound silence when he speaks ("Al Aaraff" 43). The absence of any voice in the desert can be read that there is no God, or at least that there is no God *here*, which is why I suggest the story can be taken as a poetic vision of a modern hell.

The Demon finishes his tale with a great laugh and falls back "within the cavity of the tomb," cursing the frame narrator who "could not laugh with the Demon." The question of why he cannot laugh is one of many ambiguities in the piece, and is sometimes read to mean that he is dead, with the tale representing a vision of the threshold between life and death. The Demon's laugh is equally ambiguous. He laughs at the end of his narrative, but there is no clear cause for his laughter, since the narrative

was not funny in any way whatsoever. The laugh thereby gestures towards an interiority without divulging it—the Demon has a reason to laugh but does not express it. This is clearly an ironic laugh of some kind, perhaps the self-ironic laugh of a Romantic Satan, who laughs because he knows he knows nothing, reflecting the strange ambivalence of his situation in the story, both powerful and powerless. As Baudelaire writes in “The Essence of Laughter” (1855), “laughter is satanic, and, therefore, profoundly human . . . [because] it is at once a sign of infinite grandeur and of infinite wretchedness; of infinite wretchedness by comparison with the absolute Being who exists as an Idea in Man’s mind; of an infinite grandeur by comparison with the animals” (177). In his intensely ambivalent conception of Satan, Baudelaire is clearly indebted to Milton, since, as Neil Forsyth points out in *The Satanic Epic*, Milton made Satan both complex and modern by making him not only deceitful, but self-conscious and self-divided (152).

Finally, Poe’s Demon can be said to laugh in anticipation of the reader’s own impulse to laugh at the pretentious solemnity of the story, which is stoked to a ludicrous climax in the last line: “And the lynx which dwelleth forever in the tomb, came out there from, and lay down at the feet of the Demon, and looked at him steadily in the face” (*Poetry and Tales* 224). Both surreal and ridiculous, this line is typical of the tonal ambiguity Poe for which is notorious. On the one hand, Poe is trying to paint a suggestive Orientalist vision of a modern hell, stripped of symbolic depth and moral meaning, a hell of pure imagery and words. On the other, he protects himself from both censure and ridicule by locating the story in a register of self-conscious burlesque. Nevertheless, the story succeeds in creating a strangely haunting poetic effect, lingering suggestively as an

after-image of Milton's Satan transposed into a modern dream-world where evil has been replaced by loneliness.

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