Domestic Terror and Poe's Arabesque Interior

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THUMBING THROUGH THE PAGES of a May 1840 *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* the reader alights on a curious essay about the "philosophy" of interior design written by the editor, Edgar Allan Poe. Beginning with a quote from Hegel that affirms philosophy as "utterly useless" and therefore the "sublimest of all pursuits," Poe proceeds to argue for a philosophical approach to internal decoration that implicitly establishes furniture as a potential source of the sublime ("Furniture" 243). Poe's subsequent claim, though, is that this philosophy of furniture is "nevertheless more imperfectly understood by Americans than by any civilized nation on earth," to which he adds that in terms of internal decoration "the English are supreme" and "the Yankees alone are preposterous" (243). Considering the "Yankee" composition of Poe's own audience, it is not surprising that the critical response to "The Philosophy of Furniture" stresses its "intentionally humorous tone" (*The Edgar Allen Poe Society of Baltimore*). What this dominant approach ignores, though, is Poe's serious investment in modeling cultivated taste for an American audience whose own "primitive" taste precludes domestic access to the sublime.[1] To this end, Poe, posturing

1 Poe comments in "The Philosophy of Furniture" that American conceptions of taste are corrupted because they follow from the "primitive folly" of confusing

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as cultural critic, concludes the article with an invitation to his readers to watch as he sketches a "small and not ostentatious chamber with whose decorations no fault can be found" (244). Prominent among these faultless decorations is the arabesque. An analysis of Poe's arabesque reveals the link between his "humorous" theory of interior design and his serious theory of literary affect, ultimately providing the scholar with a pattern that elaborates the hitherto under-appreciated influence of Orientalism on Poe's aesthetics.[2]

Ensconced in voluminous drapes, thick carpet pile, and diffuse light, the proprietor of the chamber "with whose decorations no fault can be found" dozes peacefully as Poe ushers his readers through a diorama of eclectic furnishings which include a Saxony rug, Sevres vases, and an Argand lamp. The atmosphere is one in which Poe insists "repose speaks in all." This sphere of repose is not only achieved through obscure lighting and plush materials, it is conducted by the meditative arabesque designs which adorn the wallpaper, carpet, and "all upholstery of this nature." However, when these very same arabesque images appear in Poe's fiction, they effect not pleasant dreaming but nightmarish terror. Indeed, only a few

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the display of wealth with good taste. The definition of taste I will follow most closely is one captured by Edmund Burke. Burke defines taste as "no more than that faculty, or those faculties of the mind which are affected with, or which form a judgment of the works of imagination and the elegant arts." Taste is critical judgment, but it also has a close relation to affect. Burke's association of taste with affect is one that this article will explore through Poe's own collapse of taste into affect. Poe himself follows Burke's definition closely and even capitalizes Taste in his essays on aesthetics, as does Burke. For Burke's influence on Poe see Craig Howes, "Burke, Poe, and 'Usher': The Sublime and Rising Women" in *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance.*

2 What critical attention has been given to the question of the arabesque in Poe's aesthetics invariably defines the arabesque only in terms of its Western cultural meaning. For instance, Cecil Moffitt, in "Poe's 'Arabesque'" promises "that this study focuses attention upon the historical meaning of Arabesque" (57) and then proceeds to "demonstrate the affinity between Poe's Tales and the *Arabian Nights*" (69). Moffitt's essay is intent on proving that the arabesque means "in the manner of the Arabs," but pays no heed to what the arabesque design signified in Arab culture. Instead, Moffitt contains Poe within the fold of Western culture and its interpretation of the Eastern design. Patricia C. Smith's article "Poe's Arabesque" takes up the question of the material design's history more specifically than Moffitt, pointing to the discovery of the ruins of Pompeii in the early nineteenth century as a key factor in reviving American interest in the design pattern. But again she details only the Western history of the Eastern design. The contribution I would like to make then is to think through the arabesque not only in terms of its meaning in Western aesthetics, but in terms of its Eastern history as well. In fact by detailing the Western co-option of the Eastern symbol I hope to approach the question of the arabesque aesthetic cross-culturally.

months prior to the appearance of the *Burton's* article, Poe had published *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, a document in which he credits his "peculiar taste" for the arabesque with establishing the "tenor of terror" that defines his "serious tales."[3] The arabesque, which operates as a "rigid" representation of leisure in "The Philosophy of Furniture," becomes animate in these "serious tales"—a metamorphosis which allows terror to infiltrate the domestic sphere. What then is the relationship between Poe's use of the static arabesque as a signifier of invigorated American taste and his use of the animate arabesque as a signified American terror?

Answering why Poe perverts taste into terror necessitates unraveling the arabesque convolutions of his Romantic aesthetics. In his major essays on style, "The Poetic Principle" (1848) and "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), Poe mimics the voice of a traditional Continental Enlightenment aesthete when he extols "supernal beauty," rational methods of composition, and the equivalencies between morality and taste. In these "public" treatments of aesthetics, Poe ostensibly conforms to what Michael Davitt Bell has theorized as the conservative theory of American Romance, an approach which emphasizes balance and integration and is best exemplified by Nathaniel Hawthorne's definition of romance as "controlled, serious, moral, and conservative" (Bell, 36). However, if the progressive project of the Enlightenment was, as Horkheimer and Adorno put it, "liberating

3 The question of Poe's "peculiar" reliance on the arabesque will be taken up later in this paper, however the term "peculiar" is Poe's own choice of words. In the Preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* Poe obliges the reader with a defense not only of his peculiar title, but against the charge that he composed the volume "out of any peculiar taste or prepossession." Though Poe readily admits he has crafted his tales with a "tenor of terror" in mind, the "peculiar taste or prepossession" which he would have his reader believe the critics "tax" him for is an inordinate amount of "Germanism and gloom" in his tone. Perhaps sensitive to charges of mimicry or perhaps eager to align himself with precisely the German metaphysics which he preemptively denies as an influence, Poe is quick to attribute this straw criticism to the "prevalence of the 'Arabesque' in my serious tales" (5). However, the "Arabesque" is also what Poe credits with achieving his aforementioned desideratum, a "tenor of terror." The arabesque then, as title and as theme, is a term whose meaning Poe is anxious to control, if not exactly define. The originality of Poe's art is at stake, for he wants to highlight not his "peculiar" prepossession but the peculiarity of his final product. Indeed, the viability of American literature is at stake as well, as writers in the new nation, and particularly American Renaissance writers, struggled to rid their fiction of European derivatives and create genres and themes "peculiar" to the American spirit. Poe responds to the supposed criticism of his reliance on German influences by directing the reader to his Arab influences, but as this article will demonstrate, Poe's "Arabesque" is a not a product of Arab culture, per se, but rather the product of a European, and German in particular, interpretation of Arab culture.

men from fear and establishing their sovereignty," (3) Poe's tales of domestic terror, in particular, consciously undermine the fearless, sovereign self and exhibit a predilection for an aesthetic reification not of the Beautiful or moral, but of the monstrous, grotesque and inhuman. These tales effectively split the reader's gaze between subjective identification with the terror experienced within the tale and the objective sovereignty inherent in the mediated act of reading itself, raising the question as to where Poe locates the libidinal investment of his audience. The arabesque appealed to Poe, then, both because of the *pattern*'s geometrical formalism (its balance and integration) and because of the *style*'s associations. An analysis of Poe's different arabesques fleshes out the writer's engagement with different, and often fraught, strains of Romantic aesthetics. In Poe's tales, these European aesthetic concerns are vivified by an American fascination with Arabs, Arab culture and Arab space. In his figure of the arabesque Poe exploits imagery that had been circulating in American popular culture since the United States' engagement in the Barbary Wars at the beginning of the century. Therefore, it is not only that the arabesque *style* gives Poe the salient means through which to channel German metaphysics and Continental philosophy into the "peculiar" literary aesthetic that sets him apart from his American Renaissance contemporaries; "The Philosophy of Furniture" also provides the key to understanding how the *material* image of the arabesque instantiates this "peculiar" aesthetic through the medium of interior design.

Moving from the interior of "The Philosophy of Furniture" and into the interiors of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, one discovers that the arabesque allows Poe to tease out the latent terror quotient of the sublime image specifically through an abstracted Eastern figure. While ample critical attention has been given to Poe's development of the uncanny as erotic horror, almost none has been afforded to the role Orientalism plays in Poe's schematization of terror.[4] Furthermore, while a number of critics,

4 One notable exception to this is Dorothea Von Mucke's analysis of "Ligeia" in *The Seduction of the Occult and the Rise of the Fantastic Tale*. Von Mucke posits that the arabesque, in this story, illustrates the imaginary materiality of the signifier: "the arabesque—situated at the threshold between the linearity of the two-dimensional composition of an image and the three dimensional perspectival illusion of space—has been used to illustrate the imaginary materiality of the signifier." Von Mucke analyzes the three-dimensional vivification of the arabesque in "Ligeia" as a form of cultural anxiety. She claims that Poe was expressing his age's anxiety over print culture and the transformation of three-dimensional printing presses. I have found her analysis useful and fascinating, but my goal is to extend our understanding of Poe's arabesque beyond its role in isolated stories and to complicate its symbolic meaning in Poe's aesthetics

Poe's own adoption of the arabesque illuminates his aesthetic fascination with decadence and decay.

such as Anthony Vidler, have analyzed the psychoanalytic implications of Poe's architectural creations, few have ventured inside these Gothic haunts to scrutinize the strikingly consistent interior design motifs and catalogue their sources of influence. By charting the history of the arabesque in both Western and Eastern culture, then, I map the multiple lines of cultural transmission that intertwine in Poe's aesthetics. Finally, in placing the arabesque within the continuum of the history of the image of the Arab in ante-bellum American culture, I link the romancer's exploitation of a contemporary cultural anxiety to the aesthetic production of romance.

Poe's protestations of originality not withstanding, the appearance of the arabesque in his fiction is part of a larger nineteenth-century European Romantic fascination with the arabesque. In his use of the literary arabesque, then, Poe is explicitly reacting to rationality and to Classical form in much the same manner that German Romanticism represents a reaction to the French Enlightenment. Poe's reactionary position had already found an expression in Friedrich Schlegel's theorization of the arabesque at the end of the eighteenth century. In his early writings on aesthetics Schlegel gives the arabesque a new literary purchase, one that is central to a Romantic aesthetic that takes "the natural products of a dying epoch" (2:389) and treats them with playfulness, irony, and wit. For Schlegel, the literary arabesque represents the highest form the Romantic novel can reach, rendering the "degenerate sickliness and prosaic nature of the times" into "an artistically ordered chaos of enticing symmetries and contradictions" (Jeness 63). Schlegel, like Poe after him, is clearly interested in the aesthetic refinement of degeneracy, and the arabesque serves exactly this purpose. Though his American Renaissance contemporaries certainly dabbled in Orientalist images, Poe's own adoption of the arabesque illuminates his aesthetic fascination with decadence and decay, an interest that contrasted sharply with the Transcendentalists' sunny celebration of Persian roses and Indian Brahminism.[5] Attention to Poe's employment of arabesque, then, gives me an opportunity to separate the different strains

by considering its Eastern heritage and the stakes in the particular ante-bellum American politics of Poe's Orientalist adoption of the image. Malini Schueller's *U.S. Orientalisms* also addresses Poe's Orientalism in terms of ante-bellum American identity politics, but not in terms of the specificity of the image of the Arab as distinct from the image of the Oriental.

5 While space does not allow for a full consideration of this claim, it is my contention that images of the Arab in the American literary renaissance, in general, were associated with decay, degeneracy, and melancholy in a way which distinguished their symbolic purchase from other Oriental images, such as those from Persia and India. In my opinion, there are two discourses in the American

of Orientalism running through the American literary renaissance and to register the stakes in the transference of an image not only from popular culture into aesthetics, but from one culture to another.

In their use of the arabesque, Schlegel and Poe were both re-interpreting a design that already had a long history. Though the term *arabesque* is a Western name for the Eastern image, the design itself stretches back to the ninth century Abbasid dynasty in the Arabian Peninsula, achieves its definitive form in the eleventh century under the Seljuks, Fatimids, and Moors in the Levant and Mahgreb, reaches Islamic Spain by the twelfth century, finds its way to late fifteenth century Europe under the moniker the Moresque, and becomes fashionable during the Renaissance with men such as Albrecht Durer and Hans Holbein (Gibb 561). Ernst Kuhnel, in his seminal study of the arabesque, offers this historical view:

> Although it was the Arabs who invented the motif and fixed its image, Muslim artists of all tongues, Iranians, Turks, Indians, and Berbers used the arabesque and provided new variants, although these always followed the original spirit. Indeed its impact was so strong and persistent that, often, outside elements penetrated the range of current forms and it happened more than once that they were effortlessly introduced into the formal world of the arabesque and integrated in it. At times, Western draughtsmen were unable to escape the charm of these strange patterns, which for awhile even turned into a European fashion. (6)

There are three elements in Kuhnel's description which will be significant to our understanding of the arabesque as it finally appears in Poe—the Arab "original spirit" which defines the arabesque, the form's effortless

literary renaissance—one on Arabism and one on Orientalism—which need to be distinguished from one another if we are to understand the nuanced way in which ante-bellum Americans viewed the East and incorporated the images of the East into their own understanding of national identity. In the longer work of which this piece is a part, I write about Melville and Hawthorne in relation to their employment of Arab versus Oriental images. One might think of the narrator of "Bartleby" staring out at a deserted Wall Street on Sunday and seeing the deserted ruins of Petra. This juxtaposition of Arab ruin and American industry evokes a feeling of deep melancholy in the narrator, who is imagining Bartleby's gaze through his own gaze. Alternately, one might think of the rigid and horrifying corpse of Zenobia (ancient Syrian queen) that Coverdale dredges up from the dark void of water in *Blithedale Romance* as critiquing Orientalist excavation. For a good source on Oriental imagery in the American literary renaissance see Luther Luedtke, *Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient.*

integration of outside elements, and European fascination with "the charm of these strange patterns." In its original formation the arabesque has two aesthetic necessities, "the rhythmic change of the movements, which should balance themselves harmoniously, and the principle of complete coverage" (Kuhnel 8). It is interesting to note that by the time the arabesque had been re-interpreted by Romantics such as Schlegel it had taken on a chaotic and degenerate meaning that contradicted the harmonious and calming effect the original arabesque design had on the viewer. As Kuhnel writes, "by its balanced and serene convolution the arabesque avoids the dynamic excitement, the restless whirling and violent twisting of the Nordic ornament with which it otherwise has much in common" (*The Encyclopedia of Islam* 560). Though Kuhnel clearly delineates the arabesque's difference from other similar styles, the change in the affective meaning of the arabesque in Europe was in large part due to the conflation of these other artistic designs into the European understanding of the arabesque, a conflation facilitated by the arabesque's ability to integrate "outside elements" into its "formal world." These outside elements, in the European context, were "primitive" designs that Western travelers had brought back to Europe from Oceania and other locales, designs such as Maori house carvings, South Sea canoe prows, and Easter Island war clubs. Many of the patterns on these relics were considered arabesque, and the fact that they were also considered grotesque and primitive had an effect on the European perception of the arabesque design. Furthermore, though nineteenth century Europeans were fascinated with ornament, they categorized it as a juvenile or degenerate attempt at artistic expression.

Theories on the ornament, on the grotesque, and on the primitive all influenced the Romantic celebration of the arabesque as a counter-aesthetic, a celebration which in turn re-interpreted the original affective function of the arabesque in light of the cultural purchase it had been given in nineteenth century Europe. For while writers such as Schlegel indicate the transportive and liberating properties of the arabesque—its function as conduit to religious experience and the eternal—they nevertheless attach a frenetic aspect to a design originally meant to calm the viewer. This romantic chaos does not emanate from the arabesque object itself, though, but rather ensues from the Western subject cathecting with the Eastern object. This is "a dialectic which has lost one of its sides" (Harvey 6), though it remains for us to decide which one. We must decide whether the reading pleasure of Poe's American audience can be situated in the loss of control of Western subjectivity in the face of the Eastern object or

in the very act of controlling the meaning of the Eastern object to make it produce this loss of stable subjectivity.

Poe certainly inherited the subversive European tradition detailed above, but his own use of the arabesque resists easy categorization. In "The Philosophy of Furniture," Poe promotes the arabesque pattern as a way to ameliorate Americans' "corruption of taste," and thus the design creates not chaos, but refined comfort. This comfort flows from the room's suggestive rather than representative features:

> In brief—distinct grounds, and vivid cycloid figures, *of no meaning*, are here Median laws. The abomination of flowers, or representations of well-known objects of any kind, should not be allowed within the limits of Christendom. Indeed whether on carpets, or curtains, or tapestry, or ottoman coverings, all upholstery of this nature should be rigidly Arabesque. (243)

Poe's arabesque design, which has "no meaning," promotes the kind of obscurity that Edmund Burke argues is productive of romantic affect. In *A Philosophical Enquiry*, a book that erects a system to distinguish and define the Beautiful and the Sublime, Burke states:

> It is one thing to make an idea clear, and another to make it *affecting* to the imagination. If I make a drawing of a palace, or a landscape, I present a very clear *idea* of those objects; but then … my picture can at most affect only as the palace, temple or landscape would have affected in the reality. On the other hand, the most lively and spirited verbal description I can give, raises a very obscure and imperfect idea of such objects; but then it is in my power to raise a stronger emotion by the description than I could do by the best painting. (55)

The arabesque, in Poe's philosophical interior, works much like Burke's "verbal description," through association and metonymy. It is a heuristic device for the imagination. However, Poe's socio-spatial borders, "within the limits of Christendom," establish the licence of the arabesque as dependant on its incongruous placement in the Western drawing room. Poe's question of taste as sensation, as affect, becomes a question of taste as subjectivity and engages a different theorist of the sublime, Immanuel Kant.[6] Staring at a geometrical Islamic design which has "no meaning"

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6 For a full analysis of the influence of both Kant and Burke on a particular Poe tale, "The Fall of the House of Usher," see Jack G. Voller's "The Power of Terror: Burke and Kant in the House of Usher" in *Poe Studies*. Voller's argument is that in "Usher" Poe finds both theories of the sublime inadequate for describing

the viewer faces a manifestation of Kant's "mathematical sublime" that threatens to result in intellectual trauma. Reason must intervene, giving the experience closure and establishing the psychic comfort of man's ability to rationalize the unfathomable. Thus the arabesque may achieve the "art for art's sake" aesthetic Poe presents in "The Poetic Principle," but it also offers a controlled encounter with the sublime that produces not only the material comfort of the bourgeois drawing room but the philosophical comfort which underpins bourgeois subjectivity. By imaginatively incorporating arabesque design into American domestic space, Poe grants controlled access to the exotic and thus a domesticated experience of the sublime. Burke writes of the sublime, "when danger or pain press too nearly they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful" (36). The modification in question here is artistic co-option and circumscribed representation of the exotic.

Though space does not allow for a full consideration of the implications inherent in placing an abstracted Eastern ornament into an idealized Western drawing room, Poe's exploration of the sublime and creation of romantic sublimity through the arabesque is not free from Orientalist politics. In particular, Poe's use of the arabesque capitalizes on his era's combined fascination with ancient Eastern culture and fear of contemporary Eastern people. The Arab is pure figuration in Poe's arabesque, an image that can be assimilated into American culture as a collectible object. Through arabesque adornment the viewer/reader gains access to abstracted difference, an erotic contact made available through a cultivation of taste, but the viewer also gains the comfort of controlling the meaning of that contact. In the context of the Kantian sublime, the inscrutability of a peoples and culture spread out across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East is alleviated by the rational collection of the image of the Arab in the form of the arabesque. Through this form the Arab becomes knowable and tangible, or perhaps more accurately the West becomes knowable and tangible in

certain species of terror and that ultimately Poe rejects the redemptive power of the sublime in "Usher." While I find Voller's article interesting and useful, I am concerned with nuancing Poe's employment of the sublime to include several different types of sublime experience that often interpenetrate; hence the terms domestic and cultivated sublime help us to understand Poe's sometimes uneven treatment of the philosophical implications of both Kant and Burke's theories on terror and subjectivity. For me, it is not a question of whether Poe rejects the redemptive power of the sublime or not, but rather what intellectual work he is doing by employing tropes of the sublime that through the arabesque create domestic terror.

these acts of defining the East. But as the history of the term *arabesque* in Europe and America demonstrates, the very tool that is created to define and delimit identity can also undermine the representative politics of rationality. The mutability of the term *arabesque* in popular culture, the fact that it could refer to any number of "exotic" designs, offers Poe an image which promises containment and subverts that promise through a constant metamorphosis of its labile borders. Thus, the proximity between American and Arab culture which Poe establishes by placing the arabesque in the American domestic sphere sets the conditions for the comfortable and controlled space of the American home to be infiltrated, metonymically, by the terror of the sublime in the form of the foreign.

Poe's domestication of otherness, then, is not without its consequences. For the arabesque destabilizes the sanctity of home with its degenerate potential, its proximity to the grotesque, primitive, and monstrous. The choice European furnishings which occupy Poe's paradigmatic American apartment are accompanied by "arabesque devices" and a landscape painting of "the fairy grottoes of Stanfield" ("Furniture" 243). Thus, the threat of domestic terror is pregnant in Poe's scene of domestic tranquility, for the arabesque and grotesque potency of Poe's "devices" and "grottoes" is latent within the meditative calm which these cosmopolitan elements help to conjure. However, this is the pregnant threat which the domesticated sublime also poses, for the terror quotient of the sublime image, which is held in check by its placement in a cultivated setting, is always palpitating beneath the surface of aesthetic pleasure, giving that pleasure its heartbeat.

Once we enter the realm of Poe's fiction, though, the arabesque *pattern* operates only as a piece of the larger mosaic that is Poe's arabesque *style* of decoration. In these milieus, interiority takes on a double valence, as the chamber's furniture acts as the material manifestation of the decorator's mental furniture. For instance, the controlled display of taste which Poe advocates in "The Philosophy of Furniture" is exceeded in the decorative scheme of "The Assignation." Once the limit has been exceeded, the arabesque facilitates a passage into the sublime which is not innocuous or contained, but releases the potential for both magnificence and terror. In his Introduction to Burke's *Enquiry,* Adam Philips notes that, though their approaches were radically different, for both Kant and Burke "the Sublime was a way of thinking about excess as the key to a new kind of subjectivity" (iv). Excess as the means to acquire "a new kind of subjectivity" is the theme of Poe's assignation tale and the vehicle for this theme's exploration

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is the arabesque. The "hero" of "The Assignation" describes the romantic conceit of the cultivated sublime to the narrator:

> Once I was myself a decorist; but sublimation of folly has palled upon my soul.… Like these arabesque censers, my spirit is writhing in fire, and the delirium of this scene is fashioning me for wilder visions of that land of real dreams whither I am now rapidly departing. (*Complete Tales* 302)

The decorator may have given up the folly of décor, but he indicates that the arabesque is to the decorist what the sublime is to the romanticist—a transcendental conduit. Both the literal pattern emitted from the censers and the figurative style of the delirious décor merge to fashion the hero for "wilder visions of that land of real dreams." Poe comments in "The Philosophy of Furniture" that Turkey represents "taste in its dying agonies" (243), and he himself, in his fiction, turns towards the East, and in particular the arabesque design and motif, to vivify his artistic interest in decadence, degeneracy, and decay. Poe's arabesque literary style, as represented by the arabesque mode of decoration in "The Assignation," explores a romantic subjectivity that embraces the trauma of the sublime image and apotheosizes the vision of death that it offers as a vision of continuity.

The slippage from the leisure of "The Philosophy of Furniture" into the decadence of "The Assignation" is indicated directly through the viewer's altered reaction to the arabesque pattern. The safe comfort of the domesticated sublime is replaced with the contradictory pleasure of the cultivated sublime in order to create the tension necessary for a romantic effect. However, in Poe's tales of domestic terror, the literary goal is to create for his readers the same experience that his fantastic interiors have created for the residents within his tales, sublime terror. Or is it rather that the romancer wants to create for his readers the pleasure inherent in the *controlled* experience of terror, an experience indicative of the domestic sublime? It remains for an analysis of Poe's tales of domestic terror to define the effect he wants the arabesque to produce in his American audience and to explicate the distinctive nature of the literary arabesque.

Poe may have been more in tune with German Romantics' theorization of the arabesque and French Romantics' fascination with the grotesque than his American counterparts, but there is something uniquely American in Poe's adoption of the arabesque, something that speaks to Americans' fundamental anxiety about their own foreignness in a country that they claimed as their home. This was an anxiety which translated itself

into a cultural fear of heterogeneity that can be traced all the way back to Thomas Jefferson's discourses on the incoherence of a "heterogeneous" population and the peaceful durability of a "homogeneous" population in *Notes on the State of Virginia*.[7] Through the arabesque, then, Poe seizes on this American fear of heterogeneity and turns that fear into his unique art—the romance of alienation. In Poe's tales of domestic terror, the self becomes other and the tranquility of the domestic sphere is shattered by this alterity—be it madness, disease, or decadence. This transformation of the self into the other is facilitated by the uncanny experience which the arabesque design creates in the familiar home space. Anthony Vidler, in his book *The Architectural Uncanny,* describes the relationship of the uncanny to domestic anxiety:

> [The uncanny's] favorite motif was precisely the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence; on a psychological level, its play was one of doubling, where the other is, strangely enough, experienced as a replica of the self, all the more fearsome because apparently the same. (3)

In each of the three tales of domestic terror which will be discussed below, Poe uses the arabesque design to enact an infiltration of the domestic sphere by "an alien presence." The "contrast" between security and alienation which Vidler marks as the motif of Poe's uncanny is achieved pre-

7 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia,* 181. As America faced increasing immigration, fear of foreigners and the threat cosmopolitanism posed to American democracy manifested itself in legal actions like the Alien and Sedition Act of 1798. Jefferson offers eloquent insight into the anxiety over self-definition of the new nation:

> But are there no inconveniences to be thrown into the scale against the advantage expected from a multiplication of numbers by the importation of foreigners?.... They will bring with them the principles of the governments they leave..or if able to throw them off, it will be in exchange for an unbounded licentiousness, passing, as is usual, from one extreme to another. It would be a miracle were they to stop precisely at the point of temperate liberty. These principles, with their language, they will transmit to their children. In proportion to their numbers, they will share with us the legislation. They will infuse into it their spirit, warp and bias its direction, and render it a *heterogeneous,* incoherent, distracted mass.... May not our government be more *homogeneous*, more peaceable, more durable?

The fear over heterogeneity which Jefferson voices is linked to the very nature of America's revolutionary identity. Having witnessed the continual tumult of the French Revolution with his own eyes, Jefferson was acutely conscious

cisely through the mutable arabesque design, a design which itself has a mirroring function. The comfort of the domestic space in "The Philosophy of Furniture" becomes the horror of the decadent and deadly interiors of Poe's tales of domestic terror through an inversion of the arabesque design pattern's affect. But this inversion, this self-mirroring, is inherent in the arabesque design already, since the pattern mirrors itself in its convolutions, mimicking and inverting its own form within its formulaic geometrical production and re-production. The "alien presence" that infiltrates the home space in Poe's tales of terror is born out of the decorator's own decorative impulse—out of the subject's own effort to create the screen necessary for subjectivity. Thus Poe's arabesque literary style, which is marked by themes of doubling and inversion, emanates from the material arabesque design pattern which can be found adorning the interior spaces of these tales of "verdant decay."

To demonstrate, the morbid party crasher in "The Masque of the Red Death" embodies the abbey's arabesque interior décor and forces reconciliation between the pleasure of viewing difference, in the form of decadent art, and the horror of contact with real difference. Early in the story, Poe describes the interior design of the abbey that the Prince Prospero has decorated and chosen to seal off from the plague-ravaged town outside:

> There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust. (*Complete Tales* 271)

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of what democracy gone to the extreme looked like—mob rule. When he laments of these "foreigners" ever finding "the point of temperate liberty" he is in fact questioning the ability for revolution itself to end in stability. Anglo power, control, and ability to define the Nation itself were at stake, for with the increase of foreign population comes a "foreign" share of "legislation." In an effort to justify both a cessation of the revolutionary impulse which brought America into existence and Anglo control of government, Jefferson offers a model of homogeneity as political stability and heterogeneity as political convulsion and chaos. In essence, Jefferson perverts America's revolutionary identity and promise of inclusiveness by turning the Nation in the opposite direction, away from its revolutionary genesis and immigration roots. The "unbounded licentiousness" and the passage from "one extreme to another" which heterogeneous elements introduce into American society display Jefferson's fear of a motley society—a fear which ultimately can be traced back to Jefferson's own insistence that each American have a personal relationship to the soil. This relationship was obviously hard to achieve in Jefferson's South because of the mediating presence of slaves.

The arabesque is figured as the grotesque, a perversely anthropomorphized image which combines "unsuited limbs and appointments," but it also indexes Schlegel's theory of the literary arabesque as the organizing principle of "an artistically ordered chaos of enticing symmetries and contradictions" (Jeness 63). Ultimately the outside cannot be kept from infiltrating the inside as the Red Death appears at the masquerade ball dressed as himself, causing a thematic collapse of exterior and interior world: "the mask which concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have difficulty detecting the cheat" (*Complete Tales* 272). The theme of Poe's arabesque tales is the transformation of taste into affect, such that the art in these stories comes alive and touches its patron. This theme allegorizes the slippage of the domestic sublime into an unmediated encounter with the sublime as the distance required for "delightful horror" collapses and the experience becomes unadulterated horror. But the reader maintains the "required distance" through the act of reading, and thus the horror experienced through the medium of Poe's tale in fact reinforces the reader's control over that horror. Poe's unique contribution to the American Renaissance is to locate the reader's desire and fear in precisely this moment of collapse between representation and experience. This is a collapse that promises fulfillment of the subject's ambivalent yearning for the other approached through representation but that ultimately defers actual material contact with otherness by substituting the fiction of contact for actual contact.

Poe's unique contribution to the American Renaissance is to locate the reader's desire and fear in precisely this moment of collapse between representation and experience.

The literary arabesque is the means by which Poe achieves the effect of his romantic aesthetic, a yoking of the sublime with the degenerate, but the material arabesque speaks to Poe's affective intentions, an erasure of the boundary between text and reality—an erasure that nonetheless leaves the boundary as a residual mark. In the act of erasure *within* the text Poe approximates the affect that the reader *of* the text will feel, but the fact that this feeling is an approximation immediately re-establishes the distance that the reader must maintain to have the experience in the first place. Thus, within the context of the tale, the Prince's arabesque taste takes on the aspect of real terror only once it moves from static representation into uncanny embodiment. For the reader of the tale, however, the metamorphosis is a symbolic one and is experienced as the mediated "*tenor* of terror" (italics mine). Schlegel theorized the literary arabesque as an aesthetic which would take its material from "the natural products of a dying epoch," which is precisely the scenario Poe enacts in "The Masque of the Red Death": in the tale's last lines, "Darkness, Decay and the Red Death held dominion over all" (*Complete Tales* 273). The decadent courtiers' epoch

ends by the story's last line, while the material product of that epoch's imagination, the Prince's taste manifested in arabesque art, becomes the vehicle of their extinction and the subject of Poe's tale. However, whether or not the terror actually transfers from the page to the heart of the reader, the reader still absorbs the symbolic lesson. The residual effect of this lesson promotes the uncanny affect of the ontological impasse Poe gestures towards by fusing masquerade and reality.

Perhaps no figure better represents the symbolic implications of Poe's material arabesque pattern than the fey Rodrick Usher. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Usher takes on the qualities of a three-dimensional piece of art precisely by assuming the characteristics of the hybrid arabesque pattern: "The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not with much effort connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity" (*Complete Tales* 234). The narrative result of animating the sublime in the arabesque expression of the doomed and ethereal Usher is the production of uncanny de-familiarization, as the familiar human visage of the narrator's childhood friend is replaced with the alienating "Arabesque expression" which the narrator cannot connect to "any idea of simple humanity." But Usher, as arabesque, also appears as a literal embodiment of the dialectic between the Eastern object and the Western subject. His insanity, his self-enclosure, and his death are the result of a self-promoting dialectic and thus produce an incestual synthesis. This dialectic of self and projected self can be read in Usher's relationship to his twin sister, a relationship that in turn reflects the history of the arabesque in Western aesthetics.[8]

As a figure of sublime decay Usher acts as the representative of Poe's Orientalist "taste in its dying agonies," but he also schematizes the role of the arabesque design in Poe's arabesque aesthetic. The "family evil" from which Usher suffers, and which ultimately contributes to the ruin of his

8 The point is that both Lady Madeline and the arabesque are products of imagined difference, a difference which is really a projection of the self as perverse other. Out of supposed obligations of duty and protection, Usher pre-emptively buries his pale sister in "the maturity of her youth," a burial which both symbolically and literally preserves/imprisons a living woman in the narrow confines of a coffin. This simultaneous idealization of white female virginity and repression of white female sexuality sets the stage for the horrific image of Lady Madeline's return as a violated woman, with "blood on her white robes, and the evidence of struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame" (*Complete Tales* 245). The symbolic loss of Lady Madeline's virginity, her stains of "blood on white robes," and even the suggestion of rape, "the evidence of struggle," forces the erotic subtext Poe insinuates within Sir Lancelot's romance to the level of text.

domestic sphere, is "a morbid acuteness of the senses" (235). Usher's ailment is a hyper-sensitivity to affect:

> [T]he most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear garments only of certain textures; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror. (235)

Like the animate arabesque pattern which he embodies, Usher collapses taste into affect, such that whatever Usher literally tastes, listens to, wears, or smells acts on him to produce the effect of horror. Thus Rodrick Usher not only physically operates as a visual reference to the arabesque design pattern, his psychological malady articulates the aesthetic aims of Poe's arabesque—collapsing taste into terror.

Usher collapses taste into affect, such that whatever Usher literally tastes, listens to, wears or smells acts on him to produce the effect of horror.

Usher's hyper-sensitivity to taste translates to the hyper-conductivity of his taste. Poe's narrator clearly marks Rodrick Usher's paintings, which elicit "an intensity of intolerable awe," as accessing the sublime: "if ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Rodrick Usher" (237). However, the sight of the scrofulous Usher himself produces a reaction in the narrator almost identical to that produced by Usher's art: "the now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous luster of the eye, above all startled me and even awed me" (234). The animation of taste, of which the arabesque Rodrick Usher is an index, eventually enacts the thematic vivification of the text itself. As the narrator reads to Usher from one of Usher's books of romantic knight gallantry, the sounds on the page are correlated with the sounds of the actual movements of the prematurely buried Lady Madelaine unscrewing her coffin lid and climbing the stairs: "for there could be no doubt whatever that, in this instance, I did actually hear … a low and apparently distant … screaming or grating sound—the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon's unnatural shriek as described by the romancer" (244). The boundary separating text and reality thematically collapses as the words in Usher's book enter the "real" world of Usher and act as the onomatopoetics of horror.

The thematic embodiment of the arabesque aesthetic, in the form of the animate arabesque design, creates Poe's hallmark terror and suspends the reader in a narrowing gap between text and reality. However, the full

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When the Lady Madeline appears in Usher's room and Usher dies "a victim of the terrors he had anticipated" (245), the subconscious bursts out into the world of consciousness, the anticipated becomes the real and the repressed narrative—of female agency, of masculine insecurity, of sex—finds a voice in the perversion of the narrative signification of Lancelot's idealized romance.

Orientalist implications of creating domestic terror in the Western home through a perverse representation of Eastern culture remain imbedded in the arabesque interior design of the narrator's bridal suite in "Ligeia."

> The material was the richest cloth of gold. It was spotted all over, at irregular intervals, with *arabesque* figures, about a foot in diameter, and wrought upon the cloth in patterns of the most jetty black. But these figures partook of the true character of the *arabesque* only when regarded from a single point of view. By a contrivance now common, and indeed traceable to a remote period of antiquity, they were made changeable in aspect. To one entering the room, they bore the appearance of simple monstrosities; but upon a farther advance, this appearance gradually departed; and, step by step, as the visitor moved his station in the chamber, he saw himself surrounded by an endless succession of the ghastly forms which belong to the superstition of the Norman, or arise in the guilty slumbers of the monk. The phantasmogoric effect was vastly heightened by the artificial introduction of a strong continual current of wind behind the draperies—giving a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole. (*Complete Tales* 665)

The contrast between the atmosphere that Poe's "changeable" arabesque achieves in "Ligeia" and the arabesque's original affective purpose is striking. Kuhnel writes about the Islamic ornament that "it is obviously the decorative intention that the eye of the viewer is not arrested by the pleasant detail, but that it is delighted by the kaleidoscope passing of an ever-changing and disappearing harmony of unreal forms" (8). The pleasing detail and kaleidoscope harmony of the original "Arab spirit" is perverted into "an endless succession of ghastly forms" in the "Ligeia" interior, a perversion which speaks directly to the history of the arabesque and its co-option by Western art. In "Ligeia," the arabesque's movement from two-dimensionality to three-dimensionality is dependent on contextual "point of view"; thus as it evolves from simple monstrosity to hideous animation it reveals contemporary European conflations of the grotesque and the arabesque.

The path of the arabesque from Islamic design to Western sentiment is registered by the three-dimensional embodiment of the Eastern pattern in the figure of the Red Death, the face of Rodrick Usher, and the animation of the wallpaper in "Ligeia." In each of these instances, static pattern transforms into mobilized terror. Within the tales this metamorphosis has deadly results, but for readers the mediated feeling of terror conducted

into their bodies through the text highlights the uneasy relation between the noumena and phenomena. Readers have both the comfort of knowing they can control phenomena through noumena and the uncomfortable realization that, like the arabesque itself, once created the noumena is uncontainable. Thus the arabesque design pulses with the accrued anxiety of constantly multiplying meaning.

If the arabesque's meaning has been so widely diffused and co-opted, how effectively can a link can be drawn between the arabesque and Arab culture? In 1893 the first major study of the design pattern, Alois Riegl's book *Stilfragen,* separated the term *arabesque* from a wide range of Islamic East ornamentation with which it was often associated and gave it a narrower and more precise definition, limiting it to "a definite group of Near Eastern designs or more specifically to the stylized form of the forked rinceaux which is characteristic of Islamic art and exclusively so" (Kuhnel 4). Ernst Kuhnel, who along with Riegl wrote the entry for *arabesque* in the *The Encyclopedia of Islam,* specifically connects the arabesque to Arab culture: "rightly the design bears this connotation, as it is the most original creation of the Arab spirit" (4). Though one might justifiably ask what exactly the "Arab spirit" means, the implication is clearly that the arabesque, though associated in general with Islam, is originally a product of Arab culture and retains that cultural DNA, as it were, throughout its history.

Though this research on pattern design was done after Poe's lifetime, the latent "Arab spirit" of the arabesque was recognized in Poe's day and age and haunted Poe's own use of the design. Poe even specifically makes the connection between his use of the arabesque pattern and its Arab history. The phantasmagorical atmosphere in "Ligeia" is especially cultivated through light effects brought about by the arabesque curtains and a huge censer, "Saracenic in pattern, and with many perforations so contrived that there writhed in and out of them, as if endued with a serpent vitality, a continual succession of parti-colored fires" (*Complete Tales* 661). Through its creation of Saracenic shadows, this mode of illumination fractures the light in the room and casts Arab figures on its surfaces. The original "Arab spirit" of the arabesque is re-inscribed through the Saracenic pattern and then put into a dialectical relationship with the progressive Western spirit of the Enlightenment. The rational instrument of knowledge, light, becomes the tool of fantasy when filtered through the arabesque design. When Ligeia returns, as shadow, it is through the medium of the arabesque images which she finds expression:

Ligeia's eventual return enacts the spectral re-embodiment of the disembodied Arab: the Arab returns as the haunting penumbra which shapes the co-opted arabesque.

> I gazed with unquiet eye upon the sarcophagi in the angles of the room, upon the varying figures of the drapery and upon the writhing of the parti-colored fires in the censer overhead. My eyes then fell, as I recalled to mind the circumstances of a former night, to the spot beneath the glare of the censer where I had seen the faint traces of the shadow. (*Complete Tales* 660)

Poe picks precisely the Arab decorations—the arabesque drapes and the Saracenic censer— as the tools for re-manifesting the narrator's ideal object, Ligeia. Ligeia has been read by some critics (Schueller, Luedtke) as an "Oriental" figure and her re-manifestation through the medium of Arab imagery (literal Saracenic shadows) lends credence to the argument that she is the re-inscription of the "Arab spirit" in the arabesque. Furthermore, Ligeia's eventual return enacts the spectral re-embodiment of the disembodied Arab: the Arab returns as the haunting penumbra which shapes the co-opted arabesque. Bruce Harvey, writing about the difficulty of retrieving an authentic voice of the other from American contact literature with non-Europeans, offers a strategy for distinguishing the peculiarity of different Orientalist images in ante-bellum American culture:

> when the non-European world is textually recreated in terms of authorial anxieties, the former may be deemed in fact as nonexistent. Still, in such cases I do not believe that mere self-reflexivity prevails or that foreign people or places become weightless. The cultural or psychological service that the non-European renders the U.S. subject by being a projective screen depends upon "native" particularities, upon the U.S. subject cathecting with (which is not to say desiring) the *other*. (Harvey 6)

Ligeia's return as shadow can be read as the result of just the kind of cultural interaction between U.S. subjectivity and Arab particularity that Harvey describes. In genres such as the Oriental Tale, in literature such as *The Arabian Nights*, in Biblical allegories about Arabs as the patriarchal ancestors to Americans, and in the nostalgic recuperation of disappearing "Indian" culture into the iconography of Anglo-American identity through a symbolic scheme that conflated Bedouins and Native Americans, ante-bellum American discourse represented Arabs as abstractly romantic.[9] On

9 The Oriental Tale saw its greatest vogue in America during the years 1780–1820 and offered writers such as Benjamin Franklin a vehicle for exploring religious pluralism. This meant that American Rationalists and Deists could tap into the fantasy potential of the Oriental milieu to explore alternatives to Calvinist

the other hand, in the contact literature that came out of American slavery in Barbary, American tourism in the Holy Land and American exploration in the Levant, actual Arabs appear in ante-bellum representations as unequivocally terrifying. As patriarchs of the Biblical lands and as the proxy indigenes of the New World, Arabs then were both the fathers and children that occupied the landscape of America's symbolic past; fathers and children that Americans both invoked and faced anxiously through their claims to ownership of the American continent. Poe's arabesque aesthetic thus captures this contrast between symbolic Arabs as romantically alluring and material Arabs as potentially fatal. He uses Arab imagery to allegorize the play between representation and material contact, between domestic sublime and the unmediated sublime, between the security of home and an insecure claim to nativity. Thus, the surfaces of the arabesque domestic space of "Ligeia" become sites of cathexis and the arabesque itself becomes a cathetic instrument which binds the narrator's psychic energy into the patterns of anxiety which are projected into his interior decoration. This anxiety translates into a boomeranging domestic terror.

In Poe's tales of domestic terror, arabesque décor represents domesticated heterogeneity, an aesthetic embracement of a fascination with difference that leads to infiltration by difference. However, the real horror ensues when this difference is discovered to be sameness. Rodrick Usher's domestic space implodes in the moment when he must face himself as other, in the form of his twin sister's bloody and emaciated countenance. Prince Prospero's masked party revelers are confronted with the face of difference in the form of the Red Death that they had attempted to exclude from their insular world, but it is a face that they themselves assume by the tale's completion. The pale Rowena is replaced with the dark Ligeia, but Ligeia returns as a vision of whiteness. The House of Usher crumbles, Prince Prospero's abbey lies in death and decay, and the bridal suite of

doom and gloom and materialize the God and heaven which Puritan doctrine had insistently abstracted at a remove from human consideration. See David Reynolds, *Faith in Fiction. The Arabian Nights* was first published in the United States in the 1790s. The connection between Biblical Lands and American identity and the image of Arabs as patriarchal figures is treated in Hilton Obenzinger's *American Palestine,* and the increasing covalence of Bedouins and Native Americans in American iconography is especially evident in John Lloyd Stephens's travel narrative *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land*. This was a book which Poe had reviewed and written about for New York *Review* in 1837 (see Poe's *Complete Tales,* 549–563). Alternately, my essay "Captive Identity: Images of Barbary and Ante Bellum American Identity Politics" performs a genealogical inquiry into the history of the image of the Arab in ante-bellum American culture.

Ligeia becomes the death bed of the innocent Rowena. Thus, in the "ghastly pallor" of Rodrick's arabesque expression and in the "ghastly cerements" that cloak Ligeia's re-incarnated corpse Poe stares at a whiteness that is difference, a whiteness born of resplendent decay, a whiteness that is death. Whether this whiteness represents the blank page which faces the writer, the tabula rasa which faces the philosopher, or Anglo essentialism itself, Poe posits whiteness as anxiety.

The arabesque design thus fosters domestic terror by mirroring Anglo alterity back to the viewer in the form of adornment and décor. What febrilizes the soothing, rhythmic tendrils of the static arabesque design into a "hideous and uneasy animation" is the plasticity of the Anglo imaginary, an imaginary which invents difference from its own anxiety. An image with "no meaning" is vivified into meaning by an imagination which projects the self as other into the arabesque. The Arab is filtered out of the arabesque and replaced with the degenerate self, a degenerate self generated by the irrationality and eroticism of "Norman superstition and the guilty slumbers of a monk." The Arab is reified in the arabesque and in turn the arabesque reifies the Anglo viewer such that the Arab and the Anglo compete for the same image space. However, as Horkheimer and Adorno remind us, "every reification is an act of forgetting" (16), for the subliminal source of the ghastly aspect of the arabesque is not any Eastern or Islamic history but, rather, as Poe indicates, the Anglo-Christian anxiety of Normans and monks. Indeed, what has animated the arabesque, what has changed the design's affective meaning from religious repose to grotesque horror, is the European imagination.

The image of the Arab is doubly domesticated, then, both by being placed into the interior home space and by being anchored to an Anglo, rather than Semitic, history. What has been forgotten in this act of reification is the actual Arab. Or not entirely forgotten, for the image of the Arab remains imbedded in the arabesque as the haunting and invisible threat of domestic terror. Ultimately Poe's dis-Orientation of the arabesque, his abstraction of the pattern from its Eastern meaning, allows the image to operate as cultivated taste. However, it is the arabesque's re-orientation, the three-dimensional re-embodiment of the Eastern image with a Western imagination, that creates terror and produces Poe's own contribution to American Romanticism—the uncanny affect of alienation.

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