Gothic Cosmos: Instances and Implications of Medieval

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Gothic Cosmos:
Instances and Implications of Medieval Nostalgia
in Selected Works by Edgar Allen Poe

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I. Introduction – A Wish to Be Rid of the Nineteenth-Century

As in many of Edgar Allen Poe’s fictional works, the narrative voice in one of his more obscure pieces, “Some Words with a Mummy” (1845), seems deliberately misleading. Exhibiting an academic attentiveness to diction, despite the triviality of the details recounted (for example, that his narrator “could not [complete his] third snore” before being awakened by the ringing of a street bell), Poe lets his reader meander toward a realization of the story’s laughable premise: A crew of men living in an unknown American city exhumes an ancient Egyptian mummy, whom they revive with electrical shocks. The crew endows the mummy with the ridiculous moniker “Count Allamistakeo,” likely a play on “all-a-mistake,” or perhaps Allah, and attempts to impress him with humanity’s recent achievements. The Count, however, believes that the Capitol at Washington, D.C. is no comparison to the buildings of Aznac, that American railroads are quite unimpressive when judged against the Egyptian “iron-grooved causeways,” and that steel is totally inferior to the “edge-tools of copper” used to “execute the sharp curve work seen on [ancient] obelisks.” Then, to “vary the attack to Metaphysics,” the men present the mummy with the “Dial” – a major publication of the Transcendentalist movement spearheaded by Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson—only to receive a rather witty dismissal:

The Count merely said that Great Movements were awfully common things in his day, and as for Progress it was at one time quite a nuisance, but it never progressed.

The most telling moment in the story, however, occurs after the narrator has retired to his quarters, and sinks into despair. In spite of the reader’s likely reluctance to assume a
correlation between authorial and narrative voice, (an issue to be taken up in the fourth chapter, below), one cannot help speculating that Poe is offering up a bit of autobiography when he allows his narrator to say, “I am heartily sick of this life, and of the nineteenth-century in general. I am convinced that everything is going wrong.”

Humorous as it is, Poe’s narrator’s outburst in “Some Words with a Mummy” may also barely bring to mind C.S. Lewis’s characterization of the nineteenth-century as a “hollow” time in intellectual history, and provide a possible explanation for Poe’s own apparent longing to be done with it. Lewis proposes that the term “reason,” having fallen from its Classical and medieval position of esteem, representing the all-encompassing totality of the universe, had, by the eighteenth-century, evolved into the rather wooden designation of deductive reasoning. In turn, the “fall of reason,” promoted the Romantic elevation of the “imagination” prevailing during Poe’s lifetime. Unlike his Romantic peers and predecessors, however, Poe has a cynical edge, perhaps because for him the imagination is not the sanctuary that it seems to remain for Shelley or Coleridge. Instead, it is a frightening rabbit-hole leading into the darkest “recesses” of the human psyche, though Poe seems to satirize and stereotype the anguish of metaphysical thinkers. Poe is not a worshipper of nature as were Wordsworth and the Romantics. Often, he seems to fear it, particularly, as will be shown, in “Silence a Fable” (1837). His writing does not carry an air of “emotion recollected in tranquility.” Instead, it produces uneasiness, and seems turgid in its implications, as if it were meant to disturb the peace. “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” (1850) captures this sense of dis-ease with modern society as well. Indeed, the common trope of mental disturbance among his narrators makes it hard to place him beside his Romantic peers as one of their number.
I wish to show that part of the difficulty in placing Poe within a definite literary
tradition\(^8\) stems from his apparent desire to demonstrate the frequent overlapping of
literary traditions. As an avid reader of literature and philosophy, he calls upon thinkers
of every historical age, obscure and well-known figures alike, to illuminate the breadth of
his knowledge, and the extent of the interconnectedness of disparate canons and historical
periods. He produces works of literature replete with both explicit and implicit
references to the thinkers of antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the
Romantic period. In fact, scholars have attributed his far-ranging “diffusion” of interest
to the genre that many scholars believe Poe imported into, or reinvented in the United
States. As the supposed “father of the American Gothic,”\(^9\) he seems to possess a natural
proclivity for the kind of literary time-travel characteristic of Gothic writing in general, as
a “mode that exceeds genre and categories, restricted neither to a literary school or
historical period,” because of its “changing features, emphases and meanings.”\(^10\) As Fred
Botting observes, the Gothic draws from sources as diverse as “medieval romances,
supernatural, Faustian and fairy tales, Renaissance drama, sentimental, picaresque and
confessional narratives, as well as the ruins, tombs and nocturnal speculations that
fascinated Graveyard poets.”\(^11\)

A recurring theme in Gothic criticism, however, which envisions Gothic literature
as a mere sub-category of Romanticism, seems to contradict the image of its being a
diffuse, boundless, or pan-tradition genre. Gothic writing is often seen as marginal, or as
a phenomenon shaped and influenced by the perceived shift from neo-Classical to
Romantic thought in the early eighteenth-century. Botting summarizes the difficulty
aptly:
Gothic forms, moreover, are not only shaped by literatures of the past: the styles prevailing in the respective presents in which they were produced also provide their specific shape. Nowhere is this more evident than in the shifts that occurred within Gothic writing in the move from a neoclassical to a Romantic context. This apparent trend, in which the Gothic acts as a catalyst, has proved a valuable conceptual tool for scholars seeking to explain the emergence of Romantic poetry, even as they criticize or question the validity of the presumption that Gothic literature is Romantic. On the basis of its emphasis of the feelings of despair and ecstasy, or an experience of the sublime, Gothic writing is believed to foreshadow, or “shadow” Romanticism. In attempting to define the distinguishing features of the Gothic and Romantic styles, one scholar has also relied on the notion of a radical break from the Classical period as a characteristic of Romanticism:

The appearance of the form [of the Gothic novel] has been variously accounted for. But in general it can be seen as one symptom of a widespread shift away from neo-classical ideals of order and reason, toward romantic belief in emotion and imagination."

Advancing the idea of a progression from neo-Classical to Romantic thought, some scholars attempt to sever the literary Gothic style from its medieval association. Chris Baldick, for instance, seeks to abate the “inherited confusions” arising from the fact that the term “Gothic” has two radically different meanings—one historical, the other artistic: he notes that in its earliest sense the term refers to the ethnic identity of Germanic peoples living between the third and fifth centuries A.D.—and that although they never created a cathedral or work of fiction, their name now possesses an anti-Classical architectural and
literary connotation. He goes on to identify the Romantic movement as the partial
cause for this etymological development, which holds the “pejorative sense of the Gothic
in its place. . .through an identification of the medieval with the barbaric.”

Yet the idea of such a linear philosophical progression is problematic. In fact,
Botting admits that using 1764 and 1820, the respective dates of publication of Walpole’s
_The Castle of Otranto_, and Maturin’s _Melmoth the Wanderer_, to designate the period in
which the “key Gothic texts were produced,” and in which the shift between neo-
Classical and Romantic thought supposedly occurred, is arbitrary. His concession is
important, because this “key” Gothic period pre-dates most of Poe’s fiction, which, as I
hope to demonstrate, defies such broad-stroke philosophical distinctions. Critics, such as
Darlene Unrue, for instance, have identified Poe’s desire to give order to “subjective”
experience, suggesting that he is simultaneously “classicist” and “Romanticist,” in his use
of “subjective, macabre and fantastic” material “against the objectivity and rationality of
the classical.” Others recognize neo-Classical elements in Gothic writing beyond the
mere “trappings” of castles and other medieval settings, making it difficult to accept the
idea that the Gothic style is antithetical, or even “hostile” to medieval sensibilities.

D.W. H Robertson, for instance, recognizes a crucial similarity between medieval and
Gothic writing, and seems to bypass the presumption that Gothic and Romantic
literatures are as one because of their similar emphases on feeling, imagination and the
sublime. He avoids a superficial comparison of historical and literary Gothic styles, by
instead asserting that Gothic literature is like medieval literature as a “[non]-dramatic”
mode of expression.” He attributes dramatic modes of poetry to the Romantics, for
their tendency to describe “inward” feelings, “strong motions of the soul,” or the “outpouring of the power of the will from deep feeling toward the outer world.”

Robertson’s observation of the lack of drama in the literature of the Middle Ages pertains to a medieval preoccupation with “enigmatic surfaces,” which coincides with Eve Sedgwick’s analysis of a recurring “veil” metaphor in Gothic novels such as Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797) and M.G. Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796). The two critics thus present a relatively obscure point of intersection between Gothic and medieval literature, which undermines the presumption of a “neo-Classical versus Romantic” rift. Sedgwick suggests that Gothic literature reverses the Romantic notion of an inward selfhood, or the “depth” implied by a psychological model that refers to the self as if it were “inside” of an individual. Indeed, this “psychology of depth,” can attributed to Romantic thought, since Shelley suggests as much in his “Defence of Poetry,” when he cites Milton’s contention that “the mind is its own place,” while referring to the world as “external.” Shelley’s view of poetry as “inward sight,” moreover, almost explicitly resonates with Sedgwick’s critique of a “topographical...map of the self”: She pictures “a vesicle of life substance... separated from the surrounding reality by a thin membrane,” while Shelley imagines a “film” or “veil” of “familiarity,” which surrounds both “life” and the “world,” and “obscure us from the wonder of our being.” The Gothic refusal of depth, so to speak, seems to parallel Robertson’s view that the element of drama is absent in both Gothic and medieval literature: He defines “drama” as the “inner emotional life of the characters,” and notes that writers of both genres are not generally interested in seeing protagonists “carry on against opposing powers,” but instead appear to frame heroic struggles from, as it were, a distance. The idea that the vices and virtues of
medieval protagonists “exist as idealized entities independent of a single personality” seems relevant to Sedgwick’s point that, according to the Gothic view, individual identity is “social and relational, rather than private or original.” Both critics are instrumental in considering that Poe’s “medieval nostalgia” illuminates the Gothic conventions that he often employs, and in unearthing obscure points of contact between Gothic and medieval themes in his writing.

The complexity of Poe’s medieval nostalgia lies in the fact that, in some respects, he resembles various Romantic poets in his deference to “fancy” and poetry. The anti-Platonist undertones of Romanticism are apparent in Poe’s reliance on fancy as a means of comprehending a universe whose full parameters, he concedes, can only be imagined. In the chapter to follow, building on the theme of Poe’s simultaneously Classical and Romantic leanings, I suggest that his metaphorical prose-poem, “Eureka,” demonstrates pervasive philosophical contradictions. He wishes to frame his cosmological treatise as nothing more than a poem, as opposed to a scientific claim, and struggles to reconcile the Romantic conception of the imagination with an objective portrait of the structure of the universe. He draws on medieval thinkers, especially Plotinus, to buttress his view of the cosmos as both finite and infinite, though his own post-Enlightenment education makes it difficult to appropriate a medieval worldview in its entirety.

The focus of my third chapter will be on unearthing the relationships between Classical, medieval, and Renaissance philosophy, particularly that of Plato, Plotinus, Petrarch—all this as a means of unpacking Poe’s “Gothic” intentions in “Ligeia.” I wish to argue that Poe’s employment of the vampire motif allows him to parody Petrarchan love, while a satirical reference to neo-Platonism implies a relationship between Classical
and medieval thought. In short, Poe suggests that the Platonic and Petrarchan elevation of “will” helps to produce Plotinus’s supposedly superstitious view of matter as “evil.”

My fourth chapter seeks to demonstrate the ways in which Poe’s unusual narrative method, in such stories as “Silence, a Fable,” “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” and “The Power of Words,” employs the paradox of what I call silent narration. The use of medieval imagery of demons, angels, and “celestial music” draws attention to his ultimate adherence to the principle of poetic unity, through a subtle interplay between story “form” and “content.” I argue that Poe’s appropriation of fantastical imagery is meant to illuminate the closed universe of the fable as an analogy for the finite medieval cosmos. A silent narrator seems to comment on the so-called “power of words,” a theme of each story, as if to satirize the Romantic glorification of language and poetry as effusions of an “inward self.”

The complexity of Poe’s writings – that is, the way in which they undermine, while perpetuating the idea of a neo-Classical and Romantic divide—is disquieting. The breadth of his historical and philosophical knowledge, which spans virtually every historical age is truly awe-inspiring. He is the quintessential Gothic writer, whose use of satire demonstrates the facility with which he traverses one genre after another to produce philosophically-rich fiction and poetry. He defies the simplistic categorization of Gothic literature as merely Romantic, and therefore anti-Classical, by drawing from neo-Classical thought as often as he refers to Romantic, Transcendental or Renaissance works. The particular relationship between Gothic and medieval literature, often downplayed by critics who may seek to avoid speculation about the Goths in the Middle Ages, is exemplified by Poe’s fascination with Plato, Plotinus, and the supernatural, as
well as his non-dramatic narrative style, which seems to borrow from the medieval literary tradition. Poe illuminates the shortcomings of scholarly attempts to define Gothic conventions in primarily Romantic terms, by exhibiting a persistent nostalgia for the neo-Classical world. The cross-genre quality of his work allows him to create unusual, absurd, but highly significant images: an angelic colloquy as a parody of a Classical dialogue, for instance, or a vampire who represents Petrarch’s Laura. Poe’s use of contradiction illuminates the uncertainties surrounding any dogmatic notions of a neo-Classical-Romantic divide.
II. “Eureka,” Where the Romantic Ethos Meets the “Primum Mobile”

A comparison between the third-century author of *The Ennead*, Plotinus, and Edgar Allen Poe, the Gothic poet and fiction writer born in 1809, may surprise some readers with its sweeping cross-temporality. Poe, an author who captures the despair of life in the nineteenth-century in stories such as “Some Words with a Mummy,” “Ligeia,” or “The Man of the Crowd,” stands in contrast to medieval philosophers who are largely unaccustomed to the more modern sense of being psychologically “lost” in the cosmos. The founders of medieval thought, particularly Plotinus, conceive humanity as occupying a rigidly defined space within a universe governed by mathematical order. Theirs is a worldview at odds with that of modernity in that it diminishes the importance of the individual will, and pictures humanity embraced by a vast heavenly hierarchy. Poe imagines the world at the mercy of a power greater than itself, but this power remains for him a source of mystery, and even dread. The implication is that Poe, whom some critics see as “out of step with his time,” is, after all, nostalgic for an era he never knew. The centuries-long Scientific Revolution had uprooted the authority of the medieval cosmological model, and through the ideas of Copernicus and Galileo, forced humanity to imagine Earth as no longer at the bottom of the cosmos—as in the Ptolemaic system—but as a floating sphere in an immense domain of unknown parameters. Poe, fascinated by all things “pre-scientific,” inadvertently romanticizes in Ptolemy what now has been written off as “all a mistake.” His stance is complicated, though. In “Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe” (1848), he employs medieval vocabulary alongside the terms of nineteenth-century science, thereby elaborating Plotinian (or
essentially, neo-Platonic) philosophy. Poe’s use of contemporary scientific writings in his metaphysical treatise reveals a desire to break free from “reason” as it is understood in his time, and to arrogate the “imagination” vis-à-vis the “secularized nature religion”37 of Romanticism. The irony in Poe’s blending of scientific terms from both the Middle Ages and the nineteenth-century, however, lies in the fact that medieval thought is itself at odds with important Romantic precepts, namely, its elevation of “imagination” and “nature.” Plotinus, for example, regards the imagination as the lowest intellectual faculty, and the material world of nature as the lowest realm of the stratified universe.38 Nevertheless, “Eureka” is, in some ways, compatible with medieval cosmology; it allows the reader to consider the basis of the finite medieval model not as an entirely literal representation of reality, but as an attempt to define the limits of the rational mind.

As noted by scholars such as Halline, “Eureka” reflects “the sustained interest Poe had in religious ideas and the systematic effort he made to establish them on the Newtonian laws of harmony, proportion, and balance.”39 Nevertheless, Poe’s mingling of terms from eras dating both before and after the Scientific Revolution shows that his “sustained interest” precludes upholding the popular distinction between the “pre-scientific” and “scientific” ages that Newton helped to establish. For example, Poe combines a theory similar to atomism (a founding principle of modern chemistry and physics maintaining that all things are composed of interacting particles that follow natural laws40) with the medieval view that the universe acts according to certain “sympathies” and “antipathies.”41 The section in which Poe expounds on the origin of the universe from the “primordial particle”42 segues into a passage on the “attractive and repulsive” forces of nature said to constitute the only extant principles in nature.43
intimates that these forces are more fundamental than electricity and Newton’s law of gravity.\textsuperscript{44} Further, to argue that matter is manifested from an ethereal source,\textsuperscript{45} Poe employs the concept of “spiritual ether,” the impalpable gas believed in medieval times to fill the outermost reaches of the cosmos,\textsuperscript{46} together with the “nebular hypothesis” first posited in the eighteenth-century by William Herschel, who theorized that stars are formed in massive, molecular clouds.\textsuperscript{47} Poe draws heavily on Herschel to support his claims using the language of a scientific authority: Herschel had invented a powerful telescope in 1789, after having discovered Uranus, as well as two satellites of Saturn in 1781.\textsuperscript{48}

Using the language of both medieval and contemporary science, Poe illustrates his weakness for metaphor even within the domain of “objective” discourse. His manner of weaving together disparate modes of thought brings to mind a passage in \textit{The Discarded Image}, in which C.S. Lewis describes what a conversation between a modern person and medieval scientist might entail:

If we could ask the medieval scientist ‘Why, then, do you talk as if [stones could strive or desire],’ he might (for he was always a dialectian) retort with the counter-question, ‘But do you intend your language about laws and obedience any more literally than I intend mine about \textit{kindly enclyning}? Do you really believe that a falling stone is aware of a directive issued to it by some legislator and feels either a moral or a prudential obligation to conform?’\textsuperscript{49}

Lewis concedes that there is in fact a significant difference “on an imaginative and emotional level”\textsuperscript{50} between describing physical phenomena with spiritual, as opposed to legal, language. Poe seems to build his treatise on the fact of this difference. He
struggles, perhaps in a satirical manner, after “just the right words,” crafting his new-fangled ether-nebula theory with halts and stops: “Through the aid—by the means—through the agency of Matter,” he observes, or stumbles, “is this Ether manifested—is \textit{Spirit individualized}.”\textsuperscript{51} At times, he seems almost daunted by the task of articulation, remarking on “unspeakably distant worlds,”\textsuperscript{52} “unfathomable abysses,”\textsuperscript{53} and “immeasurably greater [spheres than Earth],”\textsuperscript{54} and questions the “right to infer”\textsuperscript{55} the unimaginable.

Poe’s perhaps too self-conscious attention to language (including his befuddling use of italics and capitalizations) exposes, however humorously, the speculative and inquiring nature of his treatise, the rhetorical playfulness of which nonetheless captivates his reader’s imagination. He speaks of the moment in which an individual, having passed a youthful stage of self-absorption, awakens from the “truth of [the] dream”\textsuperscript{56} to the reality of a “conventional World-Reason”\textsuperscript{57}:

“They say:--‘You live and the time was when you lived not. You have been created. An Intelligence exists greater than your own; and it is only through this Intelligence that you live at all.”\textsuperscript{58} That Poe regards this epiphany as “untrue,”\textsuperscript{59} and the “World-Reason” as “conventional,” shows that his definition of reason is distinctly un-medieval. Reason, in the medieval sense, meant “the whole Rational Soul,”\textsuperscript{60} an entity embodying the all-pervasive interconnectedness of every facet of the universe. Poe’s “reason,” however, resembles the “shrunken” eighteenth-century connotation of a process by which one merely “deduces one proposition from another” –a definition which Lewis ascribes to Samuel Johnson, the author of the 1755 dictionary.\textsuperscript{61} By contrast, Poe seems to equate reason
with an adult deference to God and the inevitability of death, and the end of the youthful wonder of the self’s eternal existence.

Despite his treatment of reason, however, there is a profound sense in “Eureka” of the enduring complexity of medieval thought, revised to suit the needs of a poet living in an age deemed “hollow” by medieval scholars.\(^{62}\) The essay’s medieval qualities are to be detected immediately in its central proposition, which contains traces of the philosophy of Plotinus, commonly understood as having “brought the medieval frame of mind into being.”\(^{63}\) Poe declares, “In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation.”\(^{64}\) What Poe seems to mean is that the universe began in a state of “original unity” which produced the cause of life as we perceive it, and that this cause contains the effect of death. In other words, all things are destined for death or extinction, and are, therefore, finite—but death is part of the harmonious structure of the cosmos. His notion of the “original unity” echoes Plotinus’s “the One and the Good,”\(^{65}\) which Plotinus takes to be the source from which life emanates. Poe’s “cause and effect” reasoning in his central proposition reflects not only the use of scientific language, but a view of the cosmos that attempts to incorporate the phenomenon of time. Time for Poe, as evidenced by his rejection of the “conventional” assertion that “there was a time when you lived not,” lacks finite chronology. There is no one “point” of origin in the cosmos. This may have confused some readers—those looking, perhaps, for a traceable metanarrative in “Eureka” –who find only the abstraction of an “original unity” in the place where a description of “the beginning” might have appeared. Plotinus, on the other hand, posits a conception of time that is linear. He writes: “Time may be compared to a line, which
while extending infinitely, ever depends from a point.” Plotinus adds that an “intelligible Essence” remains superior to time, embodying the “original unity” which Poe incorporates into his non-linear concept of time.

One of Poe’s aims is to refuse to identify not only a point of origin, but a center, as well. To elaborate on his nihilistic proposition, Poe visualizes an ultimately catastrophic event, or the realization of the “Germ of [All Things’] Annihilation.” He posits that in order to return to the original “Oneness…of the originally created Matter,” atoms will be compelled by the violent force of “attraction” (a synonym of the medieval notion of “sympathy”) “toward a center,” but qualifies this idea by suggesting that the movement towards the center is not a cause of the center “as such.” The center, in other words, is not necessarily the point of [the atoms’] origin. Interestingly, Plotinus is like Poe in his refusal of a central point of origin in the cosmos. Both thinkers employ a paradoxical circular analogy: Poe cites Pascal, who states: “[The Universe] is a sphere of which the center is everywhere, and the circumference, nowhere.” Plotinus describes the God of the “Nous” or “World Soul” using almost the same language: “He does not abide in place; He is contemplated in many things…just as the center of a circle exists by itself, but every point of the circle contains the center in it.”

Poe’s refusal of any particular “locality, either in the concrete or in the abstract” as the source from which the universe has sprung does not prevent him from speculating that such a central point of origin might exist. He concedes that there exists a natural tendency to “[close] our eyes equally to deduction and induction,” to fantasize about a massive revolution “of all the orbs of the Galaxy about some gigantic globe which we
take to be the central pivot of the whole.”76 In conceding to the fantasy of an all-encompassing, cosmic revolution, Poe invokes one of Plotinus’s successors, the fourth-century thinker Chalcidius, who envisions the earth at the center of a grand “celestial dance” being performed by all the planets and the stars.77 The crucial difference between these thinkers, however, is that Chalcidius believes that the celestial dance is an objective phenomenon, whereas Poe sees it as a fantasy. Poe’s wish to “close his eyes” to reason may also be taken as signifying the historical moment in which he writes: He follows after the early Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, who break away from Johnson to equate the imagination, not reason, with the “clearest insight”78 available to humankind. Chalcidius, on the other hand, builds from Plato and Plotinus’s ideas that sight was given to humankind so that they may see “providence in the sky”79 or so as to imitate its serenity and peace. Perception, for medieval thinkers, “begets philosophy”80 and remains humanity’s link to objective reality.

Poe, unlike his Romantic predecessors who champion the powers of the imagination, merely arrives at the necessity of “fancy” by way of deduction: The imagination is essential for Poe because of the mutual incomprehensibility of both possible “types” of universes: infinite and finite.

It will now be understood that, in using the phrase, “Infinity of Space,” I make no call upon the reader to entertain the impossible conception of an absolute infinity. I refer simply to the “utmost conceivable expanse” of space—a shadowy and fluctuating domain, now shrinking, now swelling, in accordance with the vacillating energies of the imagination.81
It is only through the “hardihood of the imagination”\textsuperscript{82} that the elusive idea of absolute infinity can be conceived. Infinity seems not to be an idea, but “the effort at an idea,” belonging to a class representing “thoughts of thoughts.”\textsuperscript{83} It can only be fathomed in degrees—that is, through the tentative explorations of the imagination, not the rigid mechanism of deductive reason. Finitude, however, is as impossible to fathom as absolute infinity: although the mind can intellectually grasp finitude as a possibility, it has a hard time accepting that this life may be all that there is. As Poe writes: “[Infinity] is admitted by the mind—is acquiesced in—is entertained—on account of the greater difficulty which attends the conception of a limit.”\textsuperscript{84} Therefore, one can only “fancy” that a choice is being made between “two impossibilities.”\textsuperscript{85}

Torn between absolute infinity and finitude, Poe romantically entertains both in his avowedly imaginative treatise. Indeed, the major scientific discoveries of his age seem to have astounded Poe, luring his imagination towards the possibility of an infinite universe. Herschel’s discoveries of Uranus and two satellites of Saturn weighed heavily on Poe,\textsuperscript{86} likely fueling his conviction about the power of the imagination as a means of broadening one’s perceptions.

“Moons have been seen revolving around planets; planets about stars; and the poetical instinct of humanity—its instinct of the symmetrical…impels us to the fancy of an endless extension of this system of cycles.”\textsuperscript{87}

Nevertheless, Poe’s general proposition, which sets the universe’s realization of unity contingent upon earth’s annihilation, shows deference to the powerful notion of finitude. Poe’s imagining “the death of all things” symbolizes his attempt to incorporate the “difficult concept of a limit”\textsuperscript{88} into his view of the cosmos. To come to terms with the
contradiction between unlimited and limited space, he “fancies” a distinction between the “universe proper” and the “universe of stars.”

His “universe proper” encompasses “the utmost conceivable expanse of space, with all things spiritual and material that can be imagined to exist within the compass of that expanse” (emphasis mine), but is divorced from the “universe of stars,” which he believes to be finite. By distinguishing the finite “universe of stars,” from the infinite “universe proper,” Poe appears to arrive at the medieval notion of the “Stellatum,” the ethereal outer realm, or “highest heven that ye alday seeth.”

Medieval thinkers, such as Macrobius, Chalcidius, and Pseudo-Dionysus conceive of the “Stellatum” as the domain beyond Saturn’s orbit, whose stars’ positions, unlike those of the moon and planets, are fixed. By conceding to possibility of a finite, starry realm (albeit one farther away, after Herschel’s discoveries, than just outside Saturn’s orbit), Poe entertains the medieval view of the cosmos as “unimaginably large [but] also unambiguously finite.” The medieval thinkers, however, build upon Aristotle’s rejection of the idea that infinity actually exists, and position the “Primum Mobile” as the literal frontier of space. The belief in this ethereal, outermost sphere as the initiator of “the motion of all other things,” curtails hypotheses on the existence of multiple universes, galaxies, or “clusters of clusters” of stars of an unlimited number – hypotheses which Poe is interested in entertaining.

Lewis sums up the central difference of opinion on “infinity” between medieval and Romantic thinkers:

The ‘space’ of modern astronomy may arouse terror, or bewilderment or vague reverie; the spheres of old present us with an object in which the mind can rest,
overwhelming in its greatness but satisfying in its harmony. That is the sense in which our universe is romantic, and theirs was classical.  

Indeed, one is “satisfied” by the Ptolemaic system because of the vivid portrait that it presents. As Lewis states, “[B]ecause the medieval universe is finite, it has a shape, the perfect spherical shape, containing within itself an ordered variety.”98 The medieval universe does, indeed, present a richly imagined structure with each sphere neatly demarcated: The realm of nature is everything apparent to our senses, while the spirit world of the aerial realms is delineated by the clear marker of the moon’s orbit.99 The aerial and ethereal realms are populated by “daemons” (fairies, fauns, pans and satyrs), as well as Pseudo-Dionysus’s elaborate, angelic hierarchies.100 The mystical figures embodying the outer spheres serve not only to promote the moral and spiritual edification of medieval people, but to reinforce the idea that the heavens are beyond the realm of ordinary human comprehension. In taking cosmic finitude as its central assumption, the medieval model seems to embody the contours of the human imagination itself. It pictures the “mind of God” in the farthest heavenly sphere, which, according to Pseudo-Dionysus, is surrounded by angels whose backs are turned to humanity.101 The image speaks to the idea of human ignorance of divinity. The universe’s assumed finitude, moreover, symbolizes the inevitability of death, a key component of Poe’s treatment of finitude itself.

Inge’s suggestion that medieval thinkers did not have a word that translates explicitly into “imagination,” in the Romantic sense,102 is curious, given their colorful cosmological model. The particular difference between their conceptions of “genius,” speaks further to this fundamental point of divergence on the question of the imagination.
Poe speculates on the existence of beings similar to the medieval “daemon,” a term with etymological ties to the Latin expression for “genius,” when he conjectures that “there may be a class of superior intelligences, to whom the human bias…may wear all the character of monomania.” Poe’s conception of a “man’s genius” follows the Romantic definition of his “true self,” as opposed to the medieval term which denotes an “invisible, personal, and external attendant.” For the Romantics, “fancy” is the means through which one may access this true self as a means of perceiving the overarching structure of the universe, Plotinus’s “Nous” or what Emerson refers to as the “Oversoul.” Without the aid of the imaginative faculty, the individual is lost in the terrifyingly vast domain of space. The medieval conception of the “imagination,” on the other hand, can be traced to Plotinus’s The Ennead, where he marks it as the “lowest rank among the intellectual faculties of the soul.” Plotinus does allow for the imaginative faculty to play a significant “midway” role between sensation and reasoning, though in its “highest state” the imagination becomes for him only “opinion.” For medieval people, the perfect structure of the universe is an established fact regardless of the mode through which the mind perceives it.

Plotinus’s philosophy borrows from Plato with regard to the concept of the “Nous” or “World Soul.” The “Nous” manifests itself in a top-down gradation of purity, the highest level constituting the realm of God, or the creator of perfect forms; the lower levels are composed of nature and human souls; and the lowest level is matter. Matter is often associated with evil in readings of Plotinus who explicitly states: “Our soul is of the same nature as the World Soul, and is of more value than anything bodily,” but then also qualifies that everything of material substance nevertheless emanates from “the
One” or “the Good.”¹¹⁴ Schafer explains this apparent vacillation by suggesting that Plotinus’s usage of “evil” should be understood as “unnatural,” “to denote whatever is not in order with the world in single aspects or as a whole.”¹¹⁵ As Lewis points out, nature occupies the lowest rung of the medieval cosmos because it is debased by its contact with the “unnatural,” its constant struggle to overcome perverse aberrations of the natural order of things.¹¹⁶

The popular reading of “evil matter” in Plotinus underscores another facet of medieval cosmology at odds with the Romantic ideals of Poe’s time: nature’s insubordination in a cosmic hierarchy. Poe’s Romantic treatment of nature is clear in the way that he uses the terms “matter” and “spirit” interchangeably. His subtitling “Eureka” as “An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe” further suggests his premise that matter and spirit “walk hand in hand.”¹¹⁷ Moreover, in his desire to speak at least partially in scientific terms, Poe builds his model of the universe out of the theory of atomism to understand matter in its simplest form, breaking it down into its most fundamental, indivisible units. Heedless of the Platonic distinction of soul as the “creator of forms,” Poe is fixated on matter’s heterogeneous, diverse and complex manifestations, and the apparent chaos into which particles of matter have been thrown. In fact, Poe explicitly defies the Platonic separation of body and soul by asserting that the “Godhead” is to be found in every particle of matter, and by describing God as both “spiritual and material.”¹¹¹⁸

Some of Poe’s ideas on the soul, however, duplicate Plotinian cosmology. Schafer’s use of the “fountain metaphor” to qualify the popular reading of “evil matter” in The Ennead illuminates the similarities between Poe and Plotinus. Plotinus’s “Nous”
represents the unchanging, perfect form of the universe, and is symbolized by the fountain or the “already ontologically defined generating reality.”\(^\text{119}\) The water, as an “amorphous substrate” or “undefined potentiality” represents the substance of the soul that is yet to realize itself.\(^\text{120}\) Soul only comes into being through what Schafer coins as “the dialectic of double activity,”\(^\text{121}\) when it simultaneously self-identifies and imitates the perfect functioning of the “Nous.” This process is likened to the way that the water of a fountain collects in its first tier, and then pours into the succeeding level, moving toward both itself and something else, to wit, the structure of the “World Soul.” Similarly, Poe offers that “Matter exists only as Attraction and Repulsion…taken together, as equivalent, and therefore, controvertible, expressions in Logic.”\(^\text{122}\) His perception of matter as embodying both the centripetal and centrifugal forces of attraction and repulsion parallels Plotinus’s ideas on soul’s simultaneous self-identification and imitation of the “Nous.” In Plotinus, matter is only evil insofar as it is unable to imitate the perfect form of the soul, and acts as the soul’s “supplicant,” begging for the “communication of form.”\(^\text{123}\) Poe’s description of evil seems Plotinian in the sense that it is marked by a similar “sorrow,” which is caused by one’s failing to recognize the equality of all souls, and the fact that nothing exists greater than one’s own soul.\(^\text{124}\) Poe’s definition of matter and soul as “coincident [in the struggle] toward the original Unity”\(^\text{125}\) echoes Plotinus’s view that all material things emanate from “the One and the Good.” Poe has a similarly tiered view of the cosmic structure, except he imagines not the gentle trickling of water in a fountain, but a violent collapse and consolidation of “system-atoms towards their respective centers of aggregation”\(^\text{126}\)—a catastrophic process by which moons would cave in on their planets, planets upon their suns, and suns upon their
He sets the realization of the universe’s “original unity” contingent on the Earth’s destruction, whereas Plotinus assumes its eternal life.

“Eureka” demonstrates not only several similarities with the medieval cosmological model, but an explanation, of sorts, for its appeal. Rather than position the cosmos beyond Earth, Poe internalizes the universe, using what the mind is able and unable to grasp to formulate the contours of the earthly and divine realms. He allows his reader to reconsider the finite medieval model of the cosmos as a division between merely imaginable and unimaginable domains. But while Poe’s imagination enables him to entertain medieval notions of “ether,” “daemons,” and a finite “universe of stars,” alongside nineteenth-century theories of atomism and nebular formation, it is important to note that the imagination, itself, is not a medieval value. The medieval model is grounded in the ideas of Plato and Plotinus, who elevate reason over the imagination, as well as spirit over matter. It is ironic, then, that the Romantic language with which Poe revives the concepts of a bygone era is at odds with the central tenets of what he seems to see as that age’s philosophy. By reopening cosmological discussion using the terms of disparate eras, however, Poe shines a light on the medieval model’s complex pretensions.
III. “Ligeia” as a Satire of Petrarchan Love: Poe and the “Dark Side” of Humanism

Poe’s fascination with metaphysics in “Eureka” recurs in “Ligeia,” a story in which he explores how “the thinking man” behaves in the realm of interpersonal relationships. Though fraught with medieval imagery of angels and demons, and “Dark Age” references to Druidic and Norman superstitions, “Ligeia” is, at heart, and as I hope to show, a parody of Petrarchan love, a hallmark of Renaissance Humanism, or the scholastic revival of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. In fact, the central figure in the tale serves as the reclusive narrator’s spiritual guide and the source of his undying love, and thus stands in as the “Laura” to the narrator’s Petrarch. Poe’s choice to focus his tale on a fabricated passage by a seventeenth-century neo-Platonist who believed in witches, Joseph Glanvill, immediately suggests that a satirical motive is at work in the story.128

And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth yield himself to the angels, not unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will. 129

The grandiose language presented here stands in marked contrast to Poe’s more prosaic diction. The passage seems like a foreign, or unusual medley of terms—an exaggeration of the Humanist ethos that couples the Platonic notion of “will” with medieval “angels.” One effect of Poe’s parody, then, is that it allows for an exploration of the way in which Renaissance and medieval ideas share a common denominator in Platonic philosophy. As a portrait of Petrarchan love that uses a vampire as the unattainable object, Poe’s “Ligeia” comments on the ways in which Humanism, as a revival of the idea of perfect
Platonic forms, requires a negation of classical beauty, or “demonism” in the modern sense. Poe allows one to consider the evolution of the medieval “daemon” from its original conception as an intermediary between the divine and terrestrial spheres of the “Primum Mobile,” to the “demon,” a perverse and horrific creature arousing fear and terror: no longer an angelic being that resides above humanity, the “demon” is now a “wandering essence”\textsuperscript{130} trapped in lowly material form—incidentally, that of the female body. Performing the Gothic feat of enjoining both “daemonic” and “demonic” qualities as a kind of angel-vampire, Poe shows how the challenging ideal of Petrarchan love is indeed an aberration of nature, and that to adhere to this ideal is to be haunted by the “demon” of unconsummated desire.

i. “P’s in a Pod”

Plato, Plotinus and Petrarch on the concept of “Will”

It may appeal to a kind of common sense that Petrarch, as an apparently lovesick poet, plagued with the pains of unrequited love, would become the “father of Renaissance Humanism.”\textsuperscript{131} The assumption is that he refused bodily temptations to pursue a more divine path. His legacy as an enduring, even archetypal, lover is ripe for Freudian analysis: as a redirecting of the “erotic impulse”\textsuperscript{132} to build the pillars of civilization, so to speak, Petrarchan love “explains” the West’s artistic and scientific “rebirth,” as the sacrifice needed for genuine achievement. Petrarch’s heroism lies in his loyalty to a woman who remained unattainable to him, in his noble impulse to spurn “low” instincts of jealousy and resentment for the sake of a “higher” ideal. His writing, however, is marked by a confessional style that betrays positive human weaknesses: despair, a sense
of futility and self-pity are recurring and predictable themes in the two hundred poems he dedicated to another man’s wife. The tension between high and low emotions captured in his love poetry thus translates into a perfectly ironic message: Petrarch urges his reader, through the imagined voice of St. Augustine, to “drop your humanity” and “become God.”

A genuine vagueness, however, prevails in Petrarch’s edict to “become God.” Conducive to simplistic accusations of blasphemy, the concept nevertheless resonates with a kind of emotional honesty: to transcend the all-too-human tendency towards excessive self-congratulation and self-berating, hope and despair, joy and sorrow, one must understand and resist the sway of the passions so as to gain a kind of self-mastery. Despite its popular association with Petrarch’s personal legacy, however, Renaissance Humanism reflects little more than a literary revival of the study of those authors of Greek and Roman antiquity, as an ethos that evolved from the ideas of Plato, not his medieval interpreters, Plotinus and Chalcidius. Classical thinkers such as Plato did indeed champion a simultaneously worldly and self-denying philosophy of “the good life” that would appeal to Petrarch as he coped with a difficult love triangle, but the primary motive behind Petrarch’s injunction to “become God” is simply to revive an original philosophy. The Renaissance ethos produced a Classically-derived “humanistic” worldview that discouraged belief in the superhuman, and thus contends with medieval neo-Platonism, or Plotinus’s “Nous” or “world soul” concept, which helped to produce Chalcidius’s daemon populated cosmos, or Pseudo-Dionysus’s angel hierarchy. Indeed, the second dialogue of Secretum, Petrarch’s imagined conversation with the Classical philosopher, St. Augustine, written between 1347 and 1353, summarizes the
ideas that typify Renaissance Humanism with extensive acknowledgments of such philosophers as Cicero, Seneca, and Plato:

[Cicero] was the prince of Latin oratory, and had already shown that he was not afraid to challenge Greece for the palm of literary glory. Let me add that Seneca, so notable an admirer of the Greek tongue, says in his *Declamations*, ‘All that Roman eloquence can bring forward to rival or excel the pride of Greece is connected with the name of Cicero.’

St. Augustine goes on to praise the power of the Latin and Greek languages in general:

[Some] accuse both Latin and Greek of poverty of words: and if this judgment be correct in regard to two such famous languages, what hope is there for any other?

He then invokes Seneca’s famous phrase “I was born for some higher destiny than to be a slave to my body” before launching into a motivational speech of sorts about the power of the soul and mind that have been weighed down by the “earthly tabernacle” of the “corruptible body.” He encourages Petrarch to strengthen and purify his will to live by asserting the divine origin of the human soul:

It was from Heaven your soul came forth: never will I assert a lower origin than that. But in its contact with the flesh, wherein it is imprisoned, it has lost much of its first splendor. Have no doubt of this in your mind. And not only is it so, but by reason of the length of the time it has in a manner fallen asleep; and, if one may so express it, forgotten its own beginning and its heavenly Creator.
The concept of the embodied divine soul stems directly from the “heavenly
Plato,” whom St. Augustine calls upon to remind Petrarch of the supreme imperative to reject earthly temptations:

[T]he soul must separate itself far from the passion of the flesh and tread down its imaginings before it can rise pure and free to the contemplation of the mystery of the Divine; for otherwise the thought of its mortality will make it cling to those seducing charms. You know what I mean, and you have learned this truth in Plato’s writing, to the study of which you said not long ago you had given yourself up with ardour.143

In further illustration of Petrarch’s fascination with the Classical age, he refers to God as “Apollo,” the “god of genius,” who supplies the “internal resources of the mind” which help individuals to overcome all passions and afflictions.144 St. Augustine presents a catalogue of these ailments:

Behold [man] naked and unformed, born in wailings and tears, comforted with a few drops of milk, trembling and crawling, needing the hand of another, fed and clothed from the beasts of the field, his body feeble, his spirit restless, subject to all kinds of sickness, the prey of passions innumerable, devoid of reason…knowing not how to control himself in meat or drink….emaciated with watching…disgusted with what he has, longing after what he has lost…baser than the vilest worms, his life is short, his days uncertain, his fate inevitable, since Death in a thousand forms is waiting for him at last.145

In light of the countless miseries that beset the body, “dropping one’s humanity” seems the only way to achieve the peace that classical philosophers describe as “union
with the divine.” It is apparent, therefore, that medieval philosophers also believed in this contradictory imperative. Indeed, Plotinus took the need to “drop one’s humanity” so literally that he consigned humanity to the lowest rung of the cosmos. One might wonder then if the ideals of Renaissance Humanism are fundamentally the same as those that prevailed in the era immediately preceding it. In fact, Plotinus remains true to Plato, with his belief in the “visible universe,” as a “good,” or an essential result of the “spontaneous expansion” of the divine, and not as a fall or error.  

The visible universe, is not, as the Gnostics think, evil, an unfortunate mistake, the product of some sinful affection or arbitrary whim of a spiritual being; it is the perfect image of the Intelligible World of the Nous, and it is necessary that it should exist.

In fact Plotinus has been categorized as a “Middle Platonist,” as he elaborates upon a “Second Mind or God” that moves or orders the world. This “Second Mind” builds upon Plato’s first principle of reality which posits a “transcendent Mind or God,” though Plotinus believes it is inhabited by “star-gods,” who are “more perfect and closer to the world of Nous than human beings.

Plotinus’s notion of the star-gods is unique, and thus provides insight into the ways in which medieval cosmology diverged from Platonism. Plotinus seems to have blended the gods of Greek mythology with the planetary bodies to arrive at a distinctly medieval brand of cosmology that pictures a vast celestial hierarchy, an infinite dynamic of living forms. “Daemons,” for instance, etymologically linked to the Greek term “daimon” for “spirit,” took shape during the Middle Ages. They are the intelligent beings thought to populate the “ethereal” realm beyond the “Caelum” or sky. The differences
between Plato and Plotinus, Armstrong offers, are thus subtly perceptive by way of a careful examination of *The Ennead* and Plato’s *Dialogues*, and appear to stem from varying aesthetic visions, not a radical philosophical disagreement:

Plato seems to have imagined the spiritual world as a place of static, regular mathematical pattern and geometrical intelligence ordering all things on that pattern. Plotinus’s spiritual world is a place ‘boiling with life’ where infinite power wells ups and surges eternally in a carefree spontaneity without plan or need into a splendid superabundance of living forms.\(^{151}\)

Armstrong also shows that Plotinus values the “will” of the human soul as component of the “One and the Good,” following after Plato, and foreshadowing Petrarch.

The philosophy of Plotinus is an account of an ordered structure of living reality, which proceeds eternally from its transcendent First Principle, the One or Good, and descends in an unbroken succession of stages from the Divine Intellect and the Forms therein through Souls with its various levels of experience and activity to the last and lowest realities, the forms of bodies: and it is also a showing of the way by which the soul of man which belongs to it, can experience and be active on every level of being, and is able, if it will (emphasis mine) to ascend by a progressive purification and simplification to that union with the Good which alone can satisfy it.\(^{152}\)

The parallels between Plotinian and Platonic philosophy demand attention, so as to prevent Plotinus’s, philosophy, believed to have established the “medieval frame of mind”\(^{153}\) from being cast into the denigrated category of Gnostic belief. The Gnostics
were a deeply superstitious religious sect that emerged in the middle of the second
century A.D.,\textsuperscript{154} held in disdain by Plotinus for their cult-like belief in “sacred
knowledge.”\textsuperscript{155} His affiliation with Gnostic superstition promotes the view that medieval
cosmology, replete with “daemons” and “angels” somehow diminished the value of
human “will.” In fact, a facet of Plotinian thought often unfairly attributed to the
Gnostics –his view of the “evil” of “formless” matter\textsuperscript{156} reveals upon closer examination
a close relationship to Plato’s notion of will.

In spite of his bold equation of the terms, “matter” and “evil,”—“Matter is
absolutely evil because it is an absolute deficiency of good”\textsuperscript{157} –Plotinus builds upon
Plato’s overarching principle of “will” as “virtue” in his complex portrait of evil. He
implies the dialectical production of evil in the eternal relationship between “form” and
“matter.”\textsuperscript{158} He writes: “Matter, absolute evil, never presents itself to us alone; it is
always bound in, overlaid with Form, which is good.”\textsuperscript{159} He goes on to show how one
may be duped by the “Bad” disguised as the transcendent “Good”:

Because of the power and nature of Good, the Bad is not only bad; for it appears
necessarily bound in a sort of beautiful fetters, as some prisoners are in chains of
gold; and so it is hidden by them, in order that, though it exists, it may not be seen
by the gods, and that men may be able not only to look at the Bad, but, even when
they do look at it, may be in company with images of Beauty to remind them [of
the true beauty of the Forms in the world Nous.]\textsuperscript{160}

He relies on Plato’s assertion that the “Good” is created and sustained by correct ethical
actions, that will is the “practice of virtue.” not “freedom of choice.” In other words,
Plato says that one is only “free” to practice virtue. In \textit{Protagoras}, one of Plato’s later
dialogues whose exact date of composition is unknown,\textsuperscript{161} for example, he attributes evil to the lack of virtue, praising those who willingly do good deeds, but concluding that no individual performs evil actions \textit{voluntarily}:

Simonides was not so ignorant as to say that he praised those who did no evil voluntarily, as though there were some who did evil voluntarily. For no wise man, as I believe, will allow that any human being errs voluntarily, or voluntarily does evil and dishonorable actions. But they are very well aware that all who do evil and dishonorable things do them against their will.\textsuperscript{162}

Plato’s conclusion that evil is necessarily involuntary complicates the contemporary belief that evil is in one’s power to resist, and thus lends itself to the perception that evil is a mysterious force that exists outside of oneself. It becomes difficult, then, to set Plotinus’s notions of evil apart from classical thought; his categorization of the “Bad” as a product of a “formless” substance seems to follow logically from Plato’s sense of evil as an entity that inherently betrays human will, mankind’s most fundamental prerogative and link to the divine realm of perfect forms, or Plotinus’s “world soul.” Both Plato and Plotinus refuse to define “will” as “freedom,” “whim” or any purposeful or arbitrary wielding of power, opting instead to signify the term as opaquely as “the Good” or “Nous.”

Petrarch in \textit{Secretum} builds his own notion of will these lines, positing that to live in accordance with one’s will is to wear the “yoke” of virtue:

You will only be free from this yoke [of fortune] when, caring not a straw for human passions, you bend your neck wholly to the rule of Virtue. Then you will be free, wanting nothing, then you will be independent.\textsuperscript{163}
Paradoxically, it is only through wearing the “yoke” of virtue that one becomes free, according to Petrarch. In a somewhat humorous moment in his imagined dialogue with St. Augustine, the Classical philosopher ridicules Petrarch for his juvenile angst, his assuming that the ethical imperative to live according to one’s will impedes personal freedom. Petrarch gives voice to his fears, saying:

Picture to yourself someone beset with countless enemies, with no hope of escape or of pity, with no comfort anywhere, with everyone and everything against him; his foes bring up their batteries, they mine the very ground beneath his feet…at the sight…of those fierce faces of his foes, and that utter ruin that is upon him, how should he not be utterly dismayed and overwhelmed, since, even if life itself should be left, yet to men not quite bereft of every feeling the loss of liberty alone is a mortal stroke?\(^{164}\)

As if with fatherly indifference to a child’s exaggerated haplessness, the imagined St. Augustine responds that Petrarch’s “confession is a little confused” and that he “has a bad conceit of himself.”\(^{165}\) Indeed, the dialogical structure of *Secretum* that mirrors Plato’s dialogues, allows Petrarch to wrestle with what Plato and the Classical thinkers demanded of the “good-life,” especially a moral injunction to live in accordance with “will.”

Further common points in the classical and medieval worldviews are reflected in Petrarch’s *Secretum*. In spite of its predominant references to Greek and Roman antiquity, medieval ideas about cosmic structure surface in this often-cited Renaissance text. Petrarch echoes those philosophers who imagined a tripartite human soul as a reflection of the broader cosmos:\(^{166}\) His St. Augustine remarks, “It is not for nothing that,
by those who have divided the soul into three parts, anger has been placed below the seat of reason, and reason set in the head of man as in a citadel, anger in the heart, and desire lower still in the loins.”

The medieval universe described by Plotinus is comprised of three main parts: it places nature, or the realm of matter and bodies, at the lowest level, since it is changeful and chaotic; the sky or “Caelum” above nature, and the outermost ethereal realm of angels directly below the “Primum Mobile” which is a divine ring of fire that lies beyond being. St. Augustine describes the medieval cosmos in almost the same way, identifying the same three levels. He seems to accept the same concept of medieval “nature,” though he cites Cicero, when he speaks of “the tumultuous life of cities” where “sorrow of the heart” reigns as “the fount and head of all miseries.”

He speaks of fiery outer sphere similar to the Primum Mobile: “And by the depths of the sky, the soul that has its dwelling in a place remote, and of which elsewhere…its essence is formed out a divine fire.” Additionally, Petrarch and St. Augustine refer to the medieval figure of “Fortune” or the personification of “chance,” whose cruel caprice the sixth-century thinker Boethius bemoans in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Petrarch may consciously allude to Boethius as he makes a similar complaint: “And am I not right to hate [Fortune]? Proud, violent, blind, she makes a mock of mankind.” “St. Augustine” responds by putting Fortune “in her place,” so to speak, in the manner of Boethius, who saw her as a “middleman,” in a supernatural sense, a disordering force that, in the words of Petrarch, “piles up the sorrows of our human lot.” Indeed, the sorrows to which Petrarch refers, his future readers would likely deduce, likely stem from the pain of unrequited love.
What I aim to show is that the references to medieval cosmology in Petrarch’s *Secretum*, however minor or fleeting, reflect an undercurrent in the early Renaissance that links it to the “Dark Ages,” no longer regarded as “dark” by most scholars, that preceded it. Indeed, as I have attempted to show, the Platonic elevation of “will” authorized the Plotinian identification of “evil” in matter. Poe, as a writer apparently nostalgic for a time whose thinkers presaged his own vision in “Eureka,” is privy to that undercurrent, or personal legacy as a basis from which to unearth the “dark side” of Humanism, its hidden medieval desire for daemons and angels. Poe’s satirical use of a vampire-heroine and a fabricated epigraph by the neo-Platonist Glanvill, allow one to consider the ways in which the Renaissance ideal of “will” flirts with the medieval conception of “evil.”

ii. Poe’s Satire of Petrarch as ‘Pale Lover’

I wish to argue that Poe’s “Ligeia” (1838) presents a satire of Petrarch’s famed relationship with Laura, the married noblewoman with whom the “Father of Humanism” was infatuated. The plot of “Ligeia” is straightforward: a darkly pastoral domestic scene is punctuated by the eponymous heroine’s demise. The narrator’s use of opium as a constant in the story makes it unclear whether his second marriage to the stately “Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine” is actual or hallucinatory. His new bride seems to become ill, to die and to be “reborn” bearing supernatural qualities, among these, the large, hypnotic eyes of Ligeia. Her haunting image ends the tale, punctuating what may just have been the narrator’s vision or dream. What is clear, however, is the effect that she has had on her husband, despite the fact that the two never consummate their love—and the implication that the love affair between Ligeia and the reclusive scholar is never
expressed physically. By reputation, Petrarchan love has become virtually synonymous with a noble kind of lovesickness, as Petrarch is “arguably the most lovesick poet of all time,”

resigned to his fate never to have “had” Laura. Poe’s narrator adopts a similar attitude, going to great lengths to describe Ligeia’s anomalous beauty, but referring to her as only his “friend and betrothed.”

Betraying no interest in having children with his own wife, Poe’s narrator seems a caricature of Petrarch’s in the latter’s refusal of worldly pleasure. The scholar’s form of lovesickness is satirized in his admiration of a woman, who, in all respects, seems ill herself: her beauty is that of an “emaciated,” “wan and misty-winged” goddess, who, nevertheless possesses a “majesty, quiet ease [and an] incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of… footfall,” which the narrator finds it impossible to describe.

Her physical description invites comparison with the joshing inquiry of Cavalier poet Sir John Suckling, who pokes fun at the futility of Petrarchan love in his 1637 poem, “Why so pale and wan, fond lover?”:

Why so pale and wan, fond lover?

Prithee, why so pale?

Will when looking well can’t move her,

Looking ill prevail?

Prithee why so pale?

Indeed, Ligeia seems to bear the burden of her lover’s intense admiration in her color-drained appearance; she seems to mirror the presumably sallow face of the hermit to whom she is married. Therein lies another facet of the parody: Poe’s transference of Petrarch’s nature settings for his love to the shadowy confines of the study in which his narrator, guided by the girl with “shining… divine orbs,” conducts his elusive
scholarly pursuits. In fact, Tate offers that by virtue of his indifference to consummation, Poe’s hero has fallen into a kind of “Petrarchan trap,” by having an “impossibly high love of the heroine” which “moves in on her spiritual essence.”¹⁷⁹ Were the couple to have intercourse, says Tate, the lovers would “[witness] a commitment to the order of nature, without which the higher knowledge is not possible.”¹⁸⁰

Tate’s suggestion that Ligeia, because of her apparent abstinence, is not committed to “the order of the nature” is compelling as her apparent “death” seems almost sexual. “The most convulsive writhings of her fierce spirit” during her dying days would seem an exorcism were it not for her gentle voice and “overflowing… heart.”¹⁸¹ She “wrestle[s] with the Shadow,”¹⁸² but retains a “placid”¹⁸³ expression. The “pitiable spectacle”¹⁸⁴ of her deterioration, is in fact, the reader’s first experience of her as a “natural woman,” endowed with real bodily drives, rather than as an “ethereal” being, or a merely “spiritual” presence. Ligiea’s violent struggle with death produces, nevertheless, for the narrator, an even more idealized image of femininity, perhaps because of its sexual suggestiveness: he describes it as a “more than womanly abandonment to love,” calling her dying moans a “melody more than mortal—to assumptions and aspirations which mortality has never known.”¹⁸⁵

Petrarch, to wit, speaks of his beloved in the same way, insisting on the hint of immortality in her eyes, as the fatherly St. Augustine chastises him for his enduring passions:

Spare your reproaches, I say. Thais and Livia were both mortal women. But you should be aware that she of whom you have set out to speak is a mind that has no
care for things of earth, and burns only with the love of what is heavenly. In whose face, unless truth is an empty word, a certain divine loveliness shines out; whose character is the image and picture of perfect honor; whose voice and the living expression of whose eyes have nothing mortal in it.\textsuperscript{186}

Using the image of Ligeia’s abnormal beauty, Poe makes a spectacle of Petrarchan love. He seems to draw directly from the “Third Dialogue” of the \textit{Secretum}, in which Petrarch justifies his intense attachment to a woman one presumes is Laura. Indeed, both adored women, Ligeia and the unnamed beloved of Petrarch’s sonnets are depicted with strikingly similar descriptive language. Ligeia’s spirit is “fierce” despite the “external placidity of her demeanor,”\textsuperscript{187} where “Laura” is a “fierce creature” for whom the narrator mourns.\textsuperscript{188} Petrarch’s narrator indicates lover’s edifying role in his life—her converting his physical passions into a love of knowledge for its own sake, just as Ligeia leads Poe’s narrator in his “metaphysical investigations.” The latter remarks: “This lady has led me many years / Led the heat of my young man’s desire,” adding that “she has struck me with knowledge …I felt her understanding penetrate my body.”\textsuperscript{189} Poe goes on to say:

The character of my beloved, her rare learning, her singular yet placid cast of beauty, and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language, made their way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive.\textsuperscript{190}

Poe then praises her “immense learning,” “the full knowledge of the expression of her eyes.”\textsuperscript{191}

I said her knowledge was such as I have never known in woman—but where breathes the man who has traversed, and successfully, all the wide areas of moral,
physical, and mathematical science? …The acquisitions of Ligeia were gigantic, were astounding.¹⁹²

Petrarch also elevates the beloved as a kind of spiritual teacher in “Chiare fresche e dolci acque”:

Tempo verra anchor forse
Ch’a l’usato soggiorno
Torni la fera bella et mansueta,
Et la ’v’ ella mi scores
Nel benedetto giorno,
Volga la vista disiosa et lieta,
Cercandomi: et, o pieta!,
Gia terra in fra le pietre
Vedendo, Amor l’inspiri
In guise che sospiri
Si dolemente che merce m’impetre,
Et faccia forza al cielo,
Asciugandosi gli occhi col bel velo.
And then after a waiting
The time might come, some time,
When gentleness tames her fierce scorn
And she will come again to this place
Searching for me: will find me earth under stone.
Knowing love for me, finding mercy,
She would begin to teach the stars new patterns.\textsuperscript{193}

Petrarch’s unusual astrological reference here, which endows “Laura” with the superhuman ability to influence the shape of constellations, is similar to Poe’s striking metaphor for Ligeia’s eyes as stars themselves. His narrator gazes at them as if he were searching for signs in the night sky: “Those eyes! Those large, those shining orbs! They became to me twin stars of Leda, and I to them devoutest of astrologers.”\textsuperscript{194}

Or, as in the poem “Una donna piu bella assai che’l sole,” Petrarch’s praise for his adored woman’s intelligence brings to mind Poe’s adulation for Ligeia’s “intensity of thought, action or speech.”\textsuperscript{195} “I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation,”\textsuperscript{196} the studious recluse declares. Petrarch is similarly enamored with “Laura”’s intellect:

\begin{verbatim}
 Questa in penseri, n opre et in parole
(pero ch’e de le cose al mondo rade)
 Questa per mille strade
 Sempre inanzi mi fu leggiadra altera.
 She of the world’s most rare—
 The thousand graces of her thought,
 Speech, her actions, stood before me.\textsuperscript{197}
\end{verbatim}

Additionally, Petrarch’s “Giovene donna sotto un verde Lauro” invokes the sense of a pale and fragile beauty, who, while not explicitly so, seems to defy mortality, as does Ligeia, by living on for centuries, as the narrator’s idol:

Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro
Vidi piu biancha et piu fredda che neve
Non percossa dal sol molti et molt’anni;
E ’l suo parlare, e ‘l bel viso, et le chiome
Mi piacquen si ch’i’ l’o dinanzi agli occhi,
Ed avro sempre, ov’io sia, in poggio o ‘n riva.
A girl under a green laurel
I saw, whiter and more cold than snow
Untouched by the sun’s numberless years.
Her speaking, the grace of her look, her hair
So moved my pleasure, that I have them before my eyes,
Standing now on this shore. 198

By the poem’s end, the narrator recalls the passion that she inspired as a memory that is literally unforgettable—her beauty as an eternal force contrasted with the steady progress of his own aging, and of “time that runs out”:
Dentro pur foco, et for candida neve,
Sol con questi pensier’, con alter chiome,
Sempre piangendo andro per ogni riva,
Per far forse pieta venir negli occhi
Di talc he nascera dopo mill’anni.
You will not recognize my face. My hair
Will change, before pity lives in those eyes.
I have carved an idol of the green laurel. 199

He goes on to say:
[M]y hair / Whitened also—I will weep on this shore,

Will make pity come to the eyes

Of some gentle person to be a born a thousand years

Hence. It will be standing here still, the great laurel.200

Petrarch seems to hold to the view that his beloved is somehow supernatural of origin, a god of sorts: He perceives her as an angel who knows what and who she is: “As pleased our eternal Father /Each of us was born immortal,”201 she says, referring herself and another beautiful woman who has caught the narrator’s eye. It is through this woman, that the narrator is able to glimpse visions of the afterlife and immortality.

In poem 123, Petrarch writes:

Quel vago impallidir che’l dolce riso
D’un’ amorosa nebbia ricoperse,
Con tanta maestade al cor s’offerse
Che li si fece incontr’ a mezzo ’l viso.
Connobi allor si come in paradise
Vede l’un l’altro, in tal guise s’aperse
Quel pietoso penser ch’altrì non scerse:
Ma vidil’io, ch’altrove non m’affiso.

Color drained from her face. She smiled

With some effort. My own love answered, smiling.

I knew how people see each other after they die:

The simplicity of kind knowledge. I saw it.

I was ready to see such a thing.202
Her wan face is similar to that of the pale Ligeia, whose subtle words also give Poe’s narrator intimations of what lies beyond death: “Without Ligeia, I was but a child groping benighted. Her presence, her readings alone, rendered vividly luminous the many mysteries of the transcendentalism in which we were immersed.”

Petrarch is as agitated by desire as Poe’s drug-abusing narrator. The poem “Si traviato e’il folle mi disio” captures the bitterness and desperation in which Poe’s scholar is quite at home, though Petrarch’s speaker laments the loss of his lover who has only mysteriously “escaped”:

Si traviato e ‘l folle mi’ desio
A seguitar costei che ‘n fuga e volta,
Et de’ lacci d’Amor leggier et sciolta
Vola dinanzi al lento corer mio,
Che quanto richiamando piu l’envio
Per la secura strada, men m’ascolta:
Ne mi vale spronarlo, o dargli volta;
Ch’Amor per sua natura il fa restio.
Et poi che ‘l fren per forza a se raccoglie,
I’ mi rimango in signoria di lui,
Chemal mio grado a morte mi trasporta:
Sol per venir al lauro onde si coglie
Acerbo frutto, che le piaghe altrui
Gustando affligge piu che non conforta.
I’ve come this far. My foolhardy desire
Follows her escape. She is airborne,

Careless. I can hear the four feet under me.

The less he listens to me the more I call,
Bawling directions, cautioning towards safe highways.
Neither spurring, nor yanking the reins, makes any difference.
Love, the need of it, make his nature restive.
His rage keeps the bit and the rein.
I am become already a dead rider,
Bucketing about in the saddle, out of control.
He paws, stamps at the foot of the laurel.
I take its bitter fruit in my mouth. Tasting it
Makes my wounds more desperately known.\textsuperscript{204}

Petrarch’s compelling portrait of the wretchedness of mankind helps further to illuminate
“Ligeia”\textsuperscript{’}s narrator, particularly after his first wife appears to die. The latter admits to a
“fierce moodiness of temper”\textsuperscript{205} and habitual use of drugs, betraying the anxiety of a man
of uncontrolled passions. His attitude to Lady Rowena, his second wife, demonstrates
especially a man “disgusted with what he has, longing after what he has lost”:

“I loathed [Lady Rowena] with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man.
My memory flew back, (oh, with what intensity of regret!) to Ligeia, the beloved,
the august, the beautiful, the entombed. I reveled in recollections of her purity, of
her wisdom, of her lofty, her ethereal nature, of her passionate, her idolatrous
love. Now, then did my spirit fully and freely burn with more than all the fires of
her own. In the excitement of my opium dream (for I was habitually fettered in
the shackles of the drug) I would call aloud upon her name…as if, through the
wild eagerness, the solemn passion, the consuming ardor of my longing for the
departed, I could restore her to the pathway she had abandoned.”

In the following chapter, I will explore the significance of Poe’s use of the word
“demon” to characterize Lady Rowena, when the vampire is, in fact, Ligeia.
Additionally, while Ligeia’s “spirit” may evoke the qualities of an angel, it is clear that,
phenotypically, Rowena is more like the original medieval “daemon.” Poe seems to be
aware of these contradictions, and, indeed, uses them in the service of his “Gothic” aims.

iii. The Nature of Poe’s “Gothic” Subversive Impulse:
Unearthing the Parallels between Platonic “Will” and Plotinian “Evil”

It may require an aberrant reading to appreciate Poe’s subtle use of satire in
“Ligeia.” Indeed, Poe’s decorative and erudite prose, which often seems to convey major
plot points as if they are only a secondary concern, might serve as an intentional obstacle
for the reader seeking to strike at Poe’s “meaning.” Careful perusal of the text reveals the
contradiction between “Ligeia”’s ornate narration and the frightening content that it
conveys. The reader, having become accustomed to Poe’s distinctive narrative style,
must notice the sensation of being held in suspense of the terrifying spectacle of Ligeia’s
vampiric rebirth, only to find it drily referred to as a “hideous drama of revivication.”

Even more humorous is the fact that the narrator mentions his habitual substance abuse as
if it were of no consequence to his perception of reality. Engrossed in his “metaphysical
investigations” – a phrase that ridicules the presumption that the mystery of existence can
be solved by some kind of detective work—he exaggerates, in his consumption of drugs, the stereotype of a melancholy recluse who is “out of touch with reality.” He refers to the beauty of Ligeia’s face as the “radiance of an opium dream” and imagines her, simultaneously as “the spirit entitled Romance” and the goddess “Ashtophet of idolatrous Egypt” who “presided” over their marriage, 208 betraying the self-indulgent romanticism of an opiate-dependent intellectual. The myriad historical and mythological references are further reminders of the narrator’s unusual learnedness. Poe seems to glide through history, listing names as diverse as Sir Francis Bacon, the ancient painter, Cleomenes, and the Muslim angel of death, Azrael,” as well as images as obscure as “semi-Druidical devices,” and “Saracenic” 209 designs, sarcophagi and Venetian glass. He creates the sense of a mind gone wild with association—or, in his narrator’s words, “a vivid imagination, rendered morbidly active by the terror of the lady, of the opium, and by the hour.” 210

Joking aside, Poe seems earnest about creating the impression of a person overwhelmed by the all-encompassing knowledge of which he remains perpetually at the cusp—a person privy to the expansive interconnectedness of history, its cycles and patterns, and the common threads bridging great distances and lapses in time. In this sense, it is no coincidence the preface to “Ligeia” is an amalgam of terms and symbols from the Renaissance and Middle Ages, infused with a Romantic ethos about the desire to triumph over death:

And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of
its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.\textsuperscript{211}

The passage offers a pithy encapsulation of Platonic and Plotinian notions about the fixed structure of the universe, or its “perfect forms,” or “Nous,” of which “will” is seen as an essential component, but seems also to “yield…to the angels,” a distinctly medieval concept. Poe illuminates the original Platonic definition of “will” as a literally “supernatural” entity, via its juxtaposition with the popular conception of a supernatural being, or an angel. Indeed, intimating the similarities between the West’s so-called “Dark Ages” and its Apollonian “rebirth” seem to underlie Poe’s “Gothic” intent in having his vampiric heroine speak a humanistic message. She herself appears to embody the seeming contradictions between the Classical and medieval eras: championing the “will” in the manner of Plato and Plotinus, she is, by appearances, a product of “evil matter” in the Plotinian sense, an aberration that can defy the natural process of death. Indeed, the horror of Ligeia’s resistance to death is rife with Gothic implication, as Poe seems to critique the supposed power of human “will,” which, as we have seen, is a notion held in esteem by philosophers of antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, alike. He achieves this effect via subtle means, showcasing a fabricated quotation by the seventeenth-century neo-Platonist, Joseph Glanvill—a man who sought scientific evidence for the existence of witches.\textsuperscript{212} The quote the space for Poe to dare ask the questions begged by Plato and the neo-Platonists, Plotinus and Petrarch among them: What exactly is the will? Glanvill’s “answer” seems to bastardize its original Platonic definition, which as we have seen, is “the practice of virtue,” into a concept more akin to “willpower” – the force that allows people to overcome obstacles, to endure
great pains, and in their wildest dreams, even to defeat death. Glanvill gives voice to a rather quixotic fantasy, but also challenges Plato’s most fundamental premise: Is “will” truly only the “practice of virtue”? Are people, therefore, unable to \textit{willfully} perform evil actions? Poe shows a degree of deference toward Platonic thought—Ligeia is, after all, endowed with a powerful “will” that imbues her with a supernatural power—but hints that that power, embodied in a haunting vampiric form, flirts with the “evil” about which Plotinus warns his medieval readers. Poe hints at a troubling conflation of the terms “will” and “evil,” previously deemed to be mutually exclusive, suggesting that, despite being an acceptable or sensible abstraction, “will” is rooted in the fantasy of Plato’s “perfect forms” and breeds ostensible fictions: Plotinus’s “evil matter,” Chalcidius’s “daemon,” and more contemporaneously for Poe, the modern “demon.” Indeed, Poe appears to criticize the bastardization of Platonic ideas, by painting a horrifying portrait of a powerful will—but obliquely, through the slyness of his satire, also suggests that Plato’s idealization of the will produces an ethically ambiguous reality: a hologram composed of both good and evil, so to speak, a demonic-heroine, an angelic-vampire. Ligeia’s force of will creates a “ghostly transformation” \footnote{213} or an apparently “evil” effect, since, in her dying days especially, she seems to glow in her “eager vehemence of desire for life” \footnote{214}—and is seen with “wild eyes blazed with a too—too glorious effulgence, the pale fingers…of the transparent waxen hue of the grave.” \footnote{215} Using the ghastly image of Ligeia’s fight with death, Poe reminds his reader of Plotinus’s association of “striving” with “evil”: Anything which lacks something but has something else might hold a middle position between good and evil; if its lack and its having more or less balance: but
that which has nothing because it is in want or rather is want, must necessarily be evil.”

In this light, “will” as the desire to live becomes the “want” that Plotinus deems evil, matter’s lowly “supplication for form.” Indeed, because of its association with Petrarchan love, the Renaissance elevation of the “will to live” is rooted in a certain kind of despair—that of unrequited love, or not having, which is an evil state of being in the medieval sense. While will is not evil, itself, it is touched by evil by virtue of this “wanting.” Ligeia embodies Plotinus’s view of the lowness of matter and human souls beseeching the “Nous” for “form,” in her “vehement desire for life,” exacerbated by the impossible desire to conquer death.

Griffith, however, offers a radically different take on the question of evil matter in “Ligeia” and his musings are worth considering since Poe seems deliberately to be toying with the notion of Platonic forms. Griffith asserts that where Rowena is hollow and purely-exterior beauty, Ligeia is a “wandering essence,” suggesting that, with regards to the Platonic divide between content and form (or matter and spirit), Ligeia represents “spirit” and Rowena “matter.” Although Plotinus, as a medieval philosopher, likely would be inclined to view Rowena as the ideal woman, Poe suggests that Ligeia is the timeless beauty. She is a creature of the “One and Good,” while Rowena is subject to the influences of time, and the lower Plotinian realm of matter and nature. Poe thus illuminates the unstable divide between matter and spirit, and by extension, good and evil, using his deliberately ambiguous vampire-heroine. Though Ligiea is the chronic disease that sickens and weakens Rowena, she is also the vital force that rejuvenates her before the latter’s ultimate demise. Poe seems unable to resist speculating on a kind of
“fallen” Platonic universe, imagining how the “perfect forms” might manifest themselves in apparent accidents of nature. If Ligeia is pure essence and Rowena is outer form, the former’s reincarnation suggests, according to Griffith, that “the will did not perfect its intention,” or essentially, that “will” can fail, since Ligeia does not succumb to death, but can only take on alternate material existences.

Poe, of course, does not explicitly comment on ambiguity of the “will,” but does so through the power of (satirical) suggestion: It is humorous, for instance, that Glanvill’s paraphrased message, “Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save through the weakness of his feeble will” prefaces a story that is essentially about a drug-addicted dreamer—that a man rendered completely ineffectual by his addiction would become infatuated with the powerful “will” of his beloved. It seems that Poe’s narrator, himself, has “yield[ed]…to [an] angel…through the feebleness of his weak will.” That the doctored citation appears in the story four times, moreover, (first as the story’s preface, secondly as the narrator’s recollection, then as Ligeia’s utterance as she lies on her death-bed, and finally as a whisper in the instant of her “death”) belies the notion that “Ligeia” presents a serious treatment of Petrarchan love, and not an implicit mockery of it. Indeed, the repetition of the lines creates the effect of a senseless mantra which stands out in the midst of Poe’s academic narrative style. That the excerpt is fictional offers a further hint of recklessness in Poe’s otherwise earnest story about the fundamentally human desires for love and immortality.

Poe’s connection of the supposedly exclusive terms of “will” and “evil” has broad implications, in that it unearths common-ground between the Renaissance and the “Dark-Ages.” Poe achieves this effect by merging the theme of Petrarchan love, one of the
types of Renaissance Humanism, with the symbols of medieval cosmology. Ligeia embodies this duality, as an angel brought “down to earth,” so to speak, reciting a humanistic mantra. The fact that both Petrarch and Poe’s narrator describe the women whom they love as “immortal,” indicates a distinctly medieval desire to elevate “love” above or beyond nature—a theme which I will discuss further in the following section. The processes of sex, procreation and death are aspects of nature, which, according to Plotinus, belongs at the bottom of the cosmos, because of its close contact with “evil.” The glorification of a virtuous “type” of woman contains the impulse to venerate good beings, and indicates two possible connections to medieval thought, though the first, again, relies on Freud: the concepts of “angels” and “daemons” derive from a controlled sexual impulse— from the dissonance that Plato’s ideas on the inferiority of the body created in individuals torn between physical desire and rational thought. Secondly, Petrarch’s “Humanism” depends on a negation or antithesis of humanity; “supernatural,” or “unnatural” beings help to illuminate the unique human condition. Poe seems privy to this tendency, and in critiquing it, betrays nostalgia for the medieval portrait of the cosmos, whose supernatural realms help to frame human struggles.

iv. The Shifting Eye of the Beholder and the Philosophical Implications of Ligeia’s “Unusual” Beauty

To clarify Poe’s narrator’s adoring praise of Ligeia’s unparalleled exquisiteness, one might seek to visualize her by determining the standard of beauty to which he refers. Although Poe’s reference to Francis Bacon, who established the requirement of
“strangeness in the proportion”\textsuperscript{220} for all beautiful beings, indicates a late Renaissance influence on his ideas of beauty, Ligeia’s extraordinary qualities indicate varying aesthetic traditions. In one sense, she embodies Petrarch’s Laura in her wisdom and grace, while in another, she seems like a medieval angel or “daemon” in the implication that she can outlive death, and in still another sense, her pallor and raven-black hair produce a vampiric “femme fatale” effect. Poe uses her contradictory attributes to distort the image of a “perfect woman” in Gothic style, drawing from Renaissance and medieval traditions both to preserve and to undermine accepted notions of beauty. He provokes his reader’s interest in Ligeia, only to complicate efforts to understand her. For example, in spite of his satirical positioning of Ligeia as Petrarch’s Laura, Poe describes Ligeia with medieval language: she is “ethereal,” that is, of the “ether” typically thought to compose the “stellatum,” or the home of the angels, located directly below the outermost empyrean echelon surrounding Earth.\textsuperscript{221} Having assumed Rowena’s form upon her death, Ligeia appears similar to medieval “longaevi” or “longlivers” in the implication that she is a member of the living dead. She is like the “daemon” of the Middle Ages—a creature with an originally positive association, such as a pan, satyr, nymph, faun, sylvan or any of the “blameless” beings thought to reside in the air.\textsuperscript{222} Indeed, Ligeia’s face is said to inspire an “airy and spirit-lifting vision,”\textsuperscript{223} and the poem which she pens, moreover, contains medieval imagery that seems self-referencing:

\begin{verbatim}
Lo! Tis a gala night

Within the lonesome latter years!

An angel throng, bewinged, bedight

In veils, and drowned in tears,
\end{verbatim}
Sit in a theatre, to see

A play of hopes and fears,

While the orchestra breathes fitfully

The music of the spheres.\textsuperscript{224}

The “music of the spheres” refers to the medieval concept of “celestial music” believed to be created by the revolving spheres of “Primum Mobile.”\textsuperscript{225} In the third stanza, Ligeia mentions “seraphs” that “sob at vermin fangs”\textsuperscript{226} and in the final stanza, “the angels all pallid and wan”\textsuperscript{227} – further indicating her identification with the figures of medieval cosmology.

In a strictly physical sense, however, Ligeia is not representative of the original medieval angel, or any kind of “daemon.” C.S. Lewis explains that daemons were more like “fairies,” which might surprise a modern person unaccustomed to equating the “debased…convention [of the fairy’s] antennae and gauzy wings”\textsuperscript{228} with a term that now has an almost devilish connotation. The “High Fairies,” in particular, as in the fairies in Orfeo, Bercilak in Gawain, or Malory’s Morgan le Fay,\textsuperscript{229} embody the ideals of daemonic beauty. They are richly attired and full of splendor, exhibiting material wealth and a certain robustness of figure – in a phrase, they are everything that Ligeia is not. As Lewis summarizes, with regards to envisioning the medieval daemon, “where a modern might expect the mysterious and shadowy he meets in a blaze of wealth and luxury.”\textsuperscript{230}

Though it might be difficult for the modern reader to conflate material wealth with heavenly beings, this was not the case for medieval people. Jewels, for instance in the Nibelungenleid,\textsuperscript{231} were imbued with spiritual qualities, and thus were more than status symbols or signifiers of wealth in the Middle Ages. In this regard, Lady Rowena, rather
than Ligeia, resembles the proper medieval fairy. Aside from a brief remark about her being “fair haired and blue-eyed”\(^232\), much of the reader’s sense of her physicality derives from the implication that she is wealthy. The detailed description of her bridal chamber suggests that she herself is a bejeweled and finely-figured noblewoman. Her chamber is one “so bedecked…in fantastic display”\(^233\) that she appears “in a blaze of wealth and luxury.” Moreover, her family is said to be “haughty,” afflicted with “a thirst for gold”\(^234\), which contributes to her regal image. She stands in contrast to Ligeia’s “strange” and “irregular” features, and emaciated figure, which is never adorned with jewels or gold.

The different types of beauty—Ligeia’s pale sickliness and Rowena’s more robust, even royal appearance—are significant to the evolution of the medieval “daemon.” If Rowena embodies an original conception of the term, her illness and transformation represent the “daemon’s” degradation over the course of centuries from a blameless, heavenly creature into dark figure of horror. In Gothic style, Poe elevates the abnormal beauty of Ligeia, whose hair is “raven-black” and skin like “ivory.”\(^235\) It is significant that his narrator “loathe[s] [Rowena] with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man.”\(^236\) Rowena, no longer a standard-bearer of an original kind of “daemonic” beauty, evokes, instead, the narrator’s sense of the “demonic.” She provokes his disgust, not only because he longs for his first-wife, but also because, deeply engrossed in “the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation,”\(^237\) he disdains the worldliness that the “Lady of Tremaine” represents. The subversive Gothic impulse is evident in Poe’s decision to endow the blue-eyed beauty with hauntingly dark pupils at the story’s end. In fact, the evolution of the Gothic style is symbolized in the description of the bridal chamber: “The ceiling, of gloomy looking oak, was excessively lofty, vaulted, fretted with the wildest
and most grotesque specimens of a semi-Gothic and semi-Druidical.” In mentioning the Druids, the priestly upper class of the Celtic peoples, inhabiting Great Britain and Gaul up through the first and second centuries, Poe makes explicit the sense of a Gothic encroachment on the aesthetic and mythical imagery of the Middle Ages.

More specifically, Poe’s Gothic appropriation of medieval imagery lies in his using vampiric “longevity” to replace the fantasy of the “longaevi.” While the original medieval “daemon” was literally positioned “above nature” as a kind of intermediary between humankind and the angels, the vampire is an “unnatural” aberration, albeit endowed with the power to outlive humanity for centuries. To find a place for the vampire in the medieval cosmological hierarchy would be to place it within the realm of nature, which, as readings of Plotinus indicate, is debased because of its contact with the “unnatural” and its struggle to cope with the cycles of death, decay and disease. Indeed, Ligeia embodies a darkness and pallor associated with death, and the narrator first meets her in “some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine.” That she originates from a place of decay—a city, moreover, supplies an additional hint that the narrator’s “angel” is more “unnatural” than “supernatural”–and far removed from the medieval conception of an elevated angel, though she is cherished like one.

Petrarch, therefore, is not far from Chalcidius, his medieval predecessor who also studied (and translated) Plato, and designated an imaginary realm for awe-inspiring, “heavenly” creatures. It seems vividly apparent to Poe how Petrarch, as the supposed “father of Humanism,” was haunted by the “demon” of his desire, and thus succumbed to a teleological blazon, not of an imaginary being, but only another fallible, mortal person. It follows, then, that Poe as the “father of the American Gothic,” may be seen as well-
aimed to topple Petrarch from his exalted position. His venerable reference to Sir Francis Bacon suggests as much: Bacon’s ideas on love and beauty suggest the cynical realism of a “latter-day” Renaissance thinker disposed to rebel against Petrarch’s legacy. Zagorin elucidates the way in which Bacon’s ambitious, “encyclopedic approach to knowledge” parallels Poe’s own metaphysical enterprising in “Eureka,” his poorly-received attempt to meld neo-Platonism together with medieval and nineteenth-century science, in order to arrive at an updated “theory of the universe.” Zagorin catalogues Bacon’s own broad interests, which included philosophy, metaphysics, logic, epistemology, and the various natural sciences, and even, somewhat surprisingly, “acoustics, hydrography, and botany,” maintaining that though his purpose was also to incorporate Classical ideas in his scientific approach to attaining knowledge, Bacon ultimately wished to “attack” an antiquated worldview:

To obtain a better understanding of Bacon’s philosophical project, we might helpfully regard it as an extended attack upon what I shall call, with a certain looseness, the old regime of knowledge. By the latter I mean the number of values, assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs that were a heritage of classical antiquity, Christianity, medieval Scholasticism, and of several strains in recent Renaissance thought, as well. The old regime of knowledge revered the past, especially the culture of Greece and Rome, and was very respectful of its authority. Its highest ideal was contemplative rather than active. It had no realization of the transformative potentialities of science.

Both Poe and Bacon, it should be noted, embarked upon extremely ambitious intellectual and metaphysical projects, and led fairly turbulent lives while doing so: Poe ended his
life as an impoverished alcoholic, while Bacon, as a statesman in Queen Elizabeth’s court, was removed from office after being found guilty of embezzlement. Poe’s narrator addresses Bacon with his royal appellation, Lord Verulam, betraying knowledge of the fact that Bacon was knighted in 1603. Poe speaks with his intellectual predecessor with reverence, as though he were one of the thirty-two poets who eulogized Bacon’s death in the collection of poems *Manes Verulamiani, or Shades of Verulam*, in 1626.

‘There is no exquisite beauty,’ says Bacon, Lord Verulam, speaking truly of all the forms and genera of beauty, ‘without some strangeness in the proportion.’ This statement is pulled directly from Bacon’s essay, “On Beauty,” in which he expounds on his view of beauty, as that which lacks perfect proportionality, and thus disobeys a certain “rule”:

[A] painter may make a better face than ever was; but he must do it by a kind of felicity (As a musician that maketh an excellent air of music) and not by rule. Poe calls upon Bacon to endorse his portrait of Ligeia’s “strange” and “irregular” beauty, using a Renaissance thinker who himself broke from the Classical tradition to express an unorthodox perspective on the timeless notions of beauty and love. Bacon continues in “On Beauty”, somewhat unexpectedly, to remarks upon the quality of movement essential in an individual deemed beautiful, and the necessity that a beautiful person age well:

If it be true that the principle part of beauty is in decent motion, certainly it is no marvel though persons in years seem many times more amiable; *pulchrorum autumnus pulcher* [beautiful persons have a beautiful Autumn].
Poe’s narrator’s enamored account of the dying Ligeia thus takes on a new significance in light of his reference to “Lord Verulam.” Ligeia’s loving placidity as she writhes in fierce vehemence against death captures both prerequisites of Bacon’s definition of beauty – “decent motion” and a graceful demise. That she glows with a “too glorious effulgence” is again suggestive of Bacon, who in this regard borrows from Plato in his equation of virtue with beauty: “if [beauty] light well, it maketh virtue shine.” An interesting point of departure away from Plato, however, lies in Bacon’s use of material terms to describe virtue: “Of Beauty” begins with the statement “Virtue is like a rich stone, best plain-set.” This modest line is fraught with anti-Platonist implications, suggesting Bacon’s desire to break from “the old regime of knowledge” encompassing not only Plato, but Plotinus, as well. If “virtue” in the Classical sense refers to the prerogative of “will,” and as we have seen, authorizes the medieval notion of “evil” as “matter,” Bacon’s sense of virtue as a “rich, plain-set stone” offers a defiant contradiction that serves Poe well. The image summarizes Bacon’s shift in focus, away from Platonic idealism and toward empiricism, an earnest or simply more objective, appraisal of the material world. His conflation of the Classical ideal of “virtue” with a “stone,” an object so straightforwardly emblematic of “matter,” suggests Poe’s own impulse to marry the love of beauty with a scientific approach to understanding the world. Despite his medieval sympathies, Poe cannot carry out his “Gothic” subversion of Classical standards by invoking Plotinus, as the latter’s view of evil would cast Ligeia as the perversion of lowly nature, and Rowena, in her original “daemonic” glory at the pinnacle of an antiquated gradation of beauty. Plotinus’s view of ugliness, moreover, contains the predictable theme of disproportionality that would condemn Ligeia: “A thing is also ugly
when it is not completely dominated by shape and *logos* since its matter has not submitted to be completely shaped according to the form. ²⁵³

Unpacking Poe’s reference to Bacon reveals another element of the late-Renaissance thinker’s philosophy relevant to the idea that Ligeia is a satire of Petrarchan love: his essay “On Love” illuminates new ways of perceiving the “Ligeia as Laura” metaphor central to this thesis.  Bacon drives a stake (pun intended) into Petrarch’s lofty notion of a love so pure it can transcend the pain of not being reciprocated, with the rather harsh assertion that if love is not mutual, it must inspire the beloved’s contempt: “For it is a rule, that love is ever rewarded either with reciproque or with an inward and secret contempt.”²⁵⁴ He goes on to echo some of St. Augustine’s reproaches in the *Secretum*, concluding that amorousness is always ephemeral, and ultimately destructive. “Men ought to be aware of this passion, which loseth not only other things, but itself…For whosoever esteemeth too much of amorous affection quitteth both riches and wisdom.”²⁵⁵ Indeed, Poe’s narrator, despite his adulation of “Lord Verulam,” seems to have missed his point, enamored of Ligeia’s “strange proportions,” but forgetting Bacon’s declaration that “it is impossible to love and to be wise”²⁵⁶ in the midst of his protracted daydream.  Given Poe’s narrator’s general obliviousness, it is worth considering what Ligeia’s actual feelings may have been, since, following Bacon’s arguments, she may have held her husband in contempt: her fierce “writhing” may have been a display of anger, her “vehemence” not against death, but a husband who misunderstood and ignored her desires for affection and physical expressions of love.  Salzburg intimates as much in his observation that Ligeia shrinks from her husband’s touch during the final scene of her “reincarnation.”²⁵⁷ Poe writes: “Shrinking from my
touch, she let fall from her head, unloosened, the ghastly cerements which had confined it, and there streamed forth, into the rushing atmosphere of the chamber, huge masses of long and dishevelled hair.” The image encapsulates the sense of a recoil, followed by defiance—indeed, Bacon’s view of a beloved’s necessarily scornful indifference to her lover.

Exploring the myriad historical and philosophical references in “Ligeia” illuminates the extent of Poe’s complicated treatment of the interconnectedness of medieval and Renaissance notions. His mentioning Bacon serves to unfold a surprising take on his narrator’s relationship to Ligeia, and to expand the view of the story as a tongue-in-cheek parody of Petrarch’s love for Laura. The satirical quality of Poe’s “Ligeia” asks the reader to examine the reasons for Petrarch’s exalted position as the “founder of the Renaissance,” a title incongruous to the image of a lovesick romantic projected in his poems and prose. The dissonance in Petrarch’s legacy leads the reader to question what Renaissance Humanism actually means, and what sets it apart from the philosophies of other time periods, namely the Middle Ages. This chapter sought to complicate popular notions of the Renaissance as a radical divergence from the “Dark-Ages,” and to unearth the heavily Platonic notions that underlie both Plotinian and Petrarchan ideas. Poe demonstrates the arbitrariness of an antithetical categorization of medieval and Renaissance thought in “Gothic” style, by painting a portrait of an angelic vampire, whose powerful “will” makes her resemble Plotinus’s view of an “evil” aberration. The conflation of mutual exclusive concepts “will” and “evil” hints at the interconnectedness of disparate philosophies—a relevant theme in a story that speaks to the evolution of the medieval “daemon” into the modern “demon.” This etymological
phenomenon likely intrigued Poe as a student of classical literature and as someone who would later be dubbed as the father of the American Gothic genre. Indeed, Poe seems to use his comprehensive philosophical training to toy with a standard of beauty that draws from classical, medieval and Renaissance notions, satirizing Petrarchan love by literally “demonizing” his beloved.
IV. Silence, Colloquy, and a “Vague” Sense of “The Power of Words”:
Poe’s Demons and Angels Speak

From his expansive speculations on the structure of the cosmos in “Eureka,” to his
tongue-in-cheek portrait of the “thinking man” in “Ligeia,” Poe again broaches the
alluring subject of metaphysics in “Silence, a Fable” (1837) “The Colloquy of Monos and
Una” (1841) and “The Power of Words” (1845). These works demonstrate certain
Gothic conventions which link them more closely to the medieval—rather than
Romantic—tradition. In each story, for instance, Poe seems to reinvent the medieval
cosmos as “dark” or “Gothic” dreamscapes, assigning demons and angels, the
supernatural beings imagined by Chalcidius and Pseudo-Dionysus, as their speakers: In
“Silence, a Fable,” the “Demon” recounts a horrifying vision of sub-lunar nature as seen
from an ambiguous location akin to Dante’s purgatory, while in “The Colloquy of Monos
and Una,” an angel, Monos, describes his death to his lover Una, another angel with
whom he resides in an undefined sphere beyond Earth. In “The Power of Words,” Poe
makes an explicit reference to the Plotinian notion of “the One and the Good in naming
two conversing spirits “Oinos,” and “Agathos.”259 The unique trope of the “angelic
colloquy” seems to be a play on the conversational structure of Plato’s Dialogues, and
Petrarch’s Secretum, and betrays the neo-Classical longing which critics often have
overlooked in Gothic fiction. In fact, the use of dialogue to convey plot, and the absence
of a traditional narrator play a role in Poe’s adoption of “non-dramatic mode of
expression,”260 which critic D.W.H Robertson attributes to both Gothic and medieval
fiction. These stories are more like medieval fables for their notable lack of “drama,”
lacking periods of “exposition,” “rising action,” and “climax.” A distinctly un-Romantic
quality owing to this lack of drama permeates the stories and surfaces in ideas about language which Poe seems to satirize via an ostensibly “silent narration.”

Allowing demons and angels to speak about the “power of words” and silencing narrative voice in the face of this dialogue is a tactic with which Poe asserts his role as author. For him, it seems that the supposed power of words is bound to the empirical act of reading—indeed, a kind of dialogical exchange, which bridges the disparate worlds of reader and author, and is analogous to a stratified medieval cosmos. Additionally, Poe employs the Gothic convention of engraved characters, identified by Eve Sedgwick in her analysis of the Gothic novel, in order to frame the notion that words possess physical power from within a medieval perspective. In other words, he seems to view language as a part of the lowly, chimerical realm of “matter” or nature. Hinting at a relationship between the stories’ form and content, or the mind of the author, and “mind of God,” Poe seems more compelled by the idea of an endless “circle of analogy”261 as an example of Plato’s perfectly geometrical universe, than in perpetuating an almost Gnostic superstition about language. The palpable absence of a silent narrator is analogous to the concept of “ether,” the inaccessible realm of the “mind of God,” or in the case of the fable, the mind of Poe.

i. A Fable Told in Silence

As a bold gesture, Poe establishes the setting of “Silence, a Fable” through an almost cinematic use of dialogue.

‘Listen to me,’ says the Demon, as he placed his hand upon my head, ‘The region of which I speak is a dreary region in Libya, by the borders of the river Zaire. And there is no quiet there, nor silence.’262
Poe creates the impression of a silent and unidentified narrator observing his characters as if from beyond, using images of terrifying surreality to highlight the absurdity of the story’s geographical setting. The demon’s “Libya” is unlike any place on Earth—where fallen rain becomes “blood,” “saffron” rivers “palpitate forever,” and “sigh[ing] waterlilies” stretch “long and ghastly necks” towards the sky, as if locked in a state of teleological subordination to the “red eye of the sun.” That this fantastical domain has a specific geography creates the sense of Earth’s having a place within a universe defined by metaphysical, and not merely geometrical, parameters. It is a domain imbued with the qualities of medieval nature—wild, or changeable, and subject to the unruly influences of the moon. In fact, the “crimson moon” is seen rising “all at once,” an eerie idea perhaps suggestive of Poe’s knowledge that the moon had been significantly closer to Earth during its “primeval” or earliest age, and thus had a much faster orbit. The fourfold repetition of the phrase “but the night waned and he sat upon the rock” in consecutive paragraphs is a sensuous poetic tactic that rhythmically intimates the effect of night’s passing with unusual speed. Indeed, the demon hints that this is the stratified universe of medieval cosmology, when he observes, rather cryptically, that “there is a boundary to their realm,” likely referring to “the waters of the river.” This “boundary,” however, does not correspond simply to a “shore,” but to a border beyond which lies a whole other world, to wit, a “dark, horrible, lofty forest.” Various elements combine to form the oxymoronic vision of an unnatural forest. The preface by Greek poet Alcan of the mid-seventh century B.C.E. --“The mountain pinnacles slumber; valleys, crags and caves are silent” seems incongruous amid the forest’s inexplicable loudness:
The tall primeval trees rock eternally hither and thither with a crashing and mighty sound. . .Overhead with a rustling and loud noise, the gray clouds rush westwardly forever, until they roll, a cataract, over the fiery wall of the horizon. 270

The mystery here lies in the fact that the sounds are not explained by the meteorological phenomenon of wind, as the demon says, “But there is not wind throughout the heaven,” 271 reiterating the fact that “by the shores of the river Zaire there is neither quiet nor silence” 272 to reinforce a sense of chaos.

In light of the salient contradiction between the title and the story, the reader is invited to perceive that the plot of “Silence, a Fable” is not straightforward. In fact, the story is marked by minimal action, and instead seems to depict a chain of observations. The reader is asked to imagine an unknown narrator, watching and listening to a demon, who, in turn, is observing “he [who] sat upon the rock,” a dismayed witness who emerges amid the lurid scene. The curiously self-conscious demon hides amid water-lilies, the better to appraise him:

And I looked upwards, and there stood a man upon the summit of the rock; and I hid myself among the water-lilies that I might discover the actions of the man. And the man was tall and stately in form, and was wrapped up from his shoulders to his feet in the toga of old Rome…[H]is features were the features of a deity…In the few furrows upon his cheek I read the fables of sorrow, and weariness and disgust with mankind, and a longing after solitude. 273

The events which follow are rife with symbolic implications, and serve to illuminate Poe’s use of Gothic conventions which critic Eve Sedgwick sets out to define. She identifies the trope of engraved characters in Gothic novels, 274 shining a light on the
Gothic significance of the appearance of mutable engravings in this narrative. The
demon, despite appearing human by virtue of his self-consciousness, seems to believe
that he is endowed with supernatural abilities. He believes either that he can change
reality through the force of this thought—indeed, the power of his will—that he possesses
some all-encompassing knowledge, or that he is privy to a cosmic joke being played on
mankind. He seems to believe in the prophetic nature of language, or his own prophetic
ability, as characters engraved in a rock reading “DESOLATION” appear immediately
before he sees the downtrodden Roman. Overwhelmed by the deafening roars of
hippopotami and a behemoth, the demon then “curse[s] the elements with the curse of
tumult,” only to find the forest “crumbl[ing] before the wind” of a violent tempest.
By appearances, it seems that he has summoned a storm to the previously windless
atmosphere, while his final “curse of silence,” causes all the forest to become still, and
the rock suddenly to read “SILENCE”:

[The water-lilies] were still. And the moon ceased to totter up its pathway to
heaven—and the thunder died away—and the lightning did not flash—and the
clouds hung motionless—and the waters sunk to their level and remained—and
the trees ceased to rock—and the water-lilies sighed no more—and the murmur
was heard no longer from among them, nor any shadow of sound throughout the
vast illimitable desert.

The demon finally observes that upon seeing that the stone now reads “SILENCE,” the
man shudders and flees in haste.

The narrator arrives at the unexpected and rather ridiculous conclusion that the
fable was “the most wonderful of all,” despite the fact that it has left him feeling
somewhat alienated. One might deduce this feeling of estrangement since he is unable to laugh along with the demon:

And as the Demon made an end to his story, he fell back within the cavity of the tomb and laughed. And I could not laugh with the Demon, and he cursed me because I could not laugh.²⁸⁰

This inability to laugh indicates the narrator’s doubt of the demon’s conviction that that the engraved letters have morphed. The narrator seems to hold to the neo-Classical view held by Augustine that words should not be loved for themselves, but rather for the ideas that they represent.²⁸¹ This neo-Classical view of language contradicts the notion that words might possess an inherent or original power. That the narrator seems skeptical of the demon’s belief in the prophetic power of language indicates that he holds to this neo-Classical view of words as purely representational. The demon’s fable is filtered by the skeptical eye of the silent narrator, who seems know something which the demon does not know. His quietness and reserve stems from the fact that he is merely following the demon’s explicit instruction to “listen.” The dynamic of having his narrator listen to the dialogue serves to frame the dialogue and facilitate criticism of its content. The demon’s apparent belief in the power of words to change shape in accordance with surrounding events is thus presented in such a way as to appear spurious or doubtful. By extension, the Romantic belief in an innate power of poetry is called into question, not only because the narrator remains silent when this belief is implied, but also because it is a demon, who seems to believe in this “real” power of words.

Poe’s use of a lengthy epigraph also serves to cloud the narrator’s identity, and to raise unanswered questions that accentuate the story’s effects of uneasiness and
uncertainty. How did the narrator come to know a demon? Where are the two located? Does the demon actually possess power, or does he only appear to? The reader is almost encouraged to invent an identity for the narrator, only to be thwarted in doing so by the confusing information offered at the tale’s end. Not only is his emotional state is difficult to gauge, but also his level of sanity. His inhibitions about laughing with the demon, coupled with his ingratiating praise of the fable, suggest that he is like Poe’s many narrators who suffer some form of “psychic deterioration.”

One might imagine that as the murderer of either the “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat,” or “William Wilson,” whose narrators each seem to “live in a haunted and eerie world of [their] own making,” he is trapped in a state of eternal limbo, where he is made to exist within a nonsensical reality similar to the world of his mind. Indeed, a purgatorial psychological state is suggested in his timorous plaudit of the demon’s “most wonderful” fable, as he seems simultaneously afraid, and eager to please. Where one would expect an explanation of what the fable means to the narrator in the final paragraph, one is instead bombarded with references to other fables and legends. The narrator goes on to catalogue the “volumes of the Magi…[and] Genii” (Middle Eastern priests and spirits, respectively), “the sayings which were said by the Sybils,” or Greek and Roman prophetesses, and the “holy, holy things [that] were heard of old by the dim leaves that trembled around Dodona” the site of a sacred oracle in Greek mythology. No resolution appears that would “narrate” the narrator’s “story,” so to speak, only a vague gesture at “story-telling,” itself, as a broader phenomenon. The tale ends abruptly with a cryptic image of a lynx at the demon’s feet, staring him steadily in the face, an ending which deflects from the issue of the narrator’s identity and role in the story. The animal
witness serves to mutely satisfy the reader’s need for resolution—or at least confirmation that the demon is real.

Minimizing narrative voice is one example of “cleavage” in the relationship between author and narrator, an effect at which Poe continually aimed in his stories. Doing so, however, has earned him significant critical disdain: Henry James, W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, and even more contempraneously, Aldous Huxley all have condemned him posthumously for his “vulgarity,” lack of “seriousness,” and an apparently pre-pubescent intellect, perhaps mistaking his use of “hypertrophic language,” and “crudely poetic overemphasis” for his own voice. It may seem surprising that such august a collection of literary minds would be so swayed by the elegance of Poe’s prose as to assume that he meant for his narrators to speak on his own behalf. In fact, the opposite was likely true. As one of his recent defenders explains, “Through the irony of his characters’ self-betrayal and through the development and arrangement of his dramatic actions, Poe suggests to his readers ideas never entertained by his narrators.” In other words, Poe seems to “speak” to his readers in what his narrators do not say, through the paradox of a kind of explicit silence. Indeed, the reader’s speculations about the narrator’s identity in “Silence, A Fable,” for example, serve to illustrate the effect of a strategic use of narration, which relies on implication as a form of “silence” that imparts meaning. Although for Poe, meaning is often rife with more questions than answers, he “makes the most” of his narrators’ expected roles as “speakers,” to allow those questions to emerge implicitly. To suggest that his stories are merely “the effusions of their narrators’ often disordered mentalities” would “require the support of [a] strong prejudice” that his critics indeed betray. It is as if they seek to
blame someone for the sentimental, self-indulgent language often depicted in his stories, ignoring the likelihood of Poe’s self-awareness as a composer of not only fictional characters, but narrators, as well.

By keeping his narrator almost entirely silent in “Silence, a Fable” Poe preserves the chain of observation that underlies the story’s plot. The reader pictures a narrator, who observes a demon, who, in turn, watches a man in despair. The reader also imagines both characters, but only through the filter of the imagined narrator – an effect created by Poe’s use of an extended quotation that encompasses most of the story. The narrator, then, despite his seemingly minor role, is actually central to the story’s structure. He is a listener, co-opting the role traditionally held by the reader, who now inhabits a kind of transcendent sphere, akin to the unknown location from which the narrator and demon are situated. Poe facilitates his reader in being able to look upon the story itself, and imagine the narrator, just as the narrator looks upon the demon, and imagines the Roman.

The non-dramatic plot of “Silence, a Fable” illuminates the quality which makes this Gothic work “un-Romantic,” in critic D.W.H Robertson’s view. It lacks the common structure which modern audiences have come to expect in fictional works: a pattern of “exposition, rising action, climax and resolution,” a feature of Romantic stories where protagonists struggle to progress in opposition to antagonistic will. Classical, medieval or “Romanesque” literatures present more static representations, having “frozen the figures into immobility or twisted them into contortions incompatible with the laws of nature.” Indeed, a twisted immobility is implied in the anguished Roman’s unmoving figure and furrowed brow. “Silence, a Fable” seems all the more non-dramatic, as a story exhibiting the qualities of “fixity and repetition” which Sedgwick attributes to Gothic
novels, for Poe’s technique of repeating certain phrases (“but the night waned and he sat
upon the rock” for instance). This poetic tactic serves to slow the plot’s “progression,”
defiance of the Romantic need for rising action and a climactic outpouring of emotion.

In fact, Poe adheres to the Classical ideas about how drama ought to be executed,
adhering to principles of “unity,” as well as that of “action, character and thought,”
which comprise Aristotle’s essential components of tragedy, and contrast with a more
Romantic plot structure. Aristotle’s third principle, “thought” speaks most directly to
Poe’s manipulation of narrative voice, as it is the ability to “set forth what is contained
[in the action] and what is proper to it,” as the “function” of either the “political [or]
rhetorical art” of the characters’ speeches. I would place the demon’s dialogue in the
category of “rhetorical” art, insofar as it is framed in order to draw attention to itself as
speech or rhetoric, and by extension, to the marked silence of the narration. The dialogue
betrays the “thought” of the tale (Aristotle seems to have labeled this principle with
convenient ambiguity, as he never refers to whom the “thought” belongs, the author,
narrator or reader, for instance), as it raises numerous questions, as I have shown, and
causes one to think about the narrator’s identity, author’s intention, and the “realness” of
the characters. The demon’s words thus embody a form of speech that places the reader
in the position of having to decide “[whether] a choice is being made,” or to what
degree Poe is manipulating the reader’s response.

Aristotle also establishes that “the first principle of tragedy —the soul, in fact—is
the plot.” Poe seems to take this “plot-as-soul” paradigm literally, as the most salient
feature of the plot of “Silence, a Fable” relates to an intangible chain of observation,
rather than simply a “chain of events.” Its plot is woven together by the reader’s
knowledge of the narrator’s purposeful silence, through which Poe seems, paradoxically, to be speaking. The result is a kind of palpable absence that is accessible to the reader—just as Aristotle dictates plot should be: self-evident and of primary importance. In a more traditional sense, “Silence, a Fable” also adheres to the Aristotelian principle that “character” ought to be implied through a “mimesis of an action (praxis),” or that poets must “embrace their characters for the sake of the actions [they are to do].” Poe uses the Roman’s spare movement to illuminate his character—in fact, virtually all he “does” in the story is furrow his brow, bury his head in his hands, shudder and flee, and yet the reader is made to understand his feelings of isolation and despair. Poe thus manages to create empathy for an obscurely identified figure, “embrac[ing]” him, in Aristotelian style, “for the sake of the actions [that he does].”

Poe also seems to reinvent Aristotle’s equation of plot with the “end of tragedy,” a definition meant to emphasize the primacy of plot and action in tragedies, by once again taking it literally. While itself not a tragedy, “Silence” nevertheless appears to assume that the tragic fall of the unidentified Roman has already happened; its premise thus begins, in a literal sense, with the “end of tragedy.” The protagonist is seen, from afar, struggling against nature and himself, by all appearances hounded by his ignorance of the forces with which he contends. This kind of scenario normally ensues after revelation of “hammartia,” or fatal flaw in a traditional tragedy, but here Poe implies, without qualification, that his protagonist already has met his downfall from the onset of the tale. Indeed, the assumption of tragic fall underlies the “Gothic” quality of the story. His apparent anguish evidences a loss or separation that has pulled him into the
“horrible forest” under the watchful eye of a demon, who, unbeknownst to him, laughs at his misery.

In fact, the image is typical of Poe’s dark sense of humor: a man who might represent a philosopher such as Cicero or Horace (both of whom Poe had studied\textsuperscript{309}), or perhaps even a Roman god, is left disconsolate by such horrible disorder, while a demon lurks delightfully in the background. “Silence, A Fable” thus seems to presage “Ligeia,” whose theme, as I have shown, also deals with the intersection of Classical and medieval concepts. Indeed, the image of a Classical figure oblivious to a hiding demon speaks directly to the earliest progressions of neo-Platonism, or the medieval revisions made to Classical thought. The Roman might be thought to embody the Greek “daimon,” originally “spirit,” or simply someone who possesses Aristotle’s “eudaimonia,” translated loosely as “good spirit.” The demon, meanwhile, stands in for Chalcidius’s “daemon,” a kind of supernatural embellishment of Plato’s original conception of “spirit” as a component of the “chief good.”\textsuperscript{310} Together, via Poe’s weird vision, the two figures offer a colorful juxtaposition that illustrates the extent of the evolution of the “good spirit.” Perhaps in a moment of “crude poetic overemphasis,” Poe caricatures a man of antiquity by dressing him in stereotypical attire, and having him exhibit such obvious existential angst, as if to suggest that his belief in the “chief good” has been shattered. He is blind to his “external attendant,” the “daemon” that resides in space and is meant to supervise during times of human crisis—essentially to what a belief in the “perfect forms” inadvertently created during the Middle Ages: a cosmos believed to be inhabited by angels and demons. Poe illustrates the irony of the fact that Plato’s authoritative standard
of the “One and the Good” would spawn such diverse supernatural imagery via a
cartoonish depiction that couples a toga-wearing thinker and a frightening demon.

I would argue that Poe consciously uses such an absurd juxtaposition, replete with
a ridiculous caricature, and a wildly vivid backdrop to draw attention to the fable itself.
He seems to wish for the reader to realize the obvious fact that he or she is reading a
story, and that this is significant because the narrative medium serves as a meeting-
ground between author and reader. Indeed, the narrator of this story is situated at the
cross-roads of two entirely different, but inextricably linked, worlds: that of the story’s
content and that of its form. He is immersed in the depicted scene, but also stands at the
boundary of the reader’s world. The tale’s references to supernatural boundaries and
realms, and its employment of medieval cosmological imagery, serve to comment on
those boundaries that define the various realms of reader, author, and narrator. Indeed,
story structure appears to be of utmost importance to Poe, who prizes the principle of
poetic unity, and thus adheres to Aristotle’s dicta on its essential components. Perhaps
because a story embodies the finitude that he attributes, in “Eureka,” to the awe-inspiring
incomprehensibility of the cosmos, it serves, for Poe, as a perfect symbol of that cosmos.
By employing a “demon,” as a main character, he refers to the medieval world-view
which embraced finitude, enabling his narrator to reside, plot-wise, in what appears to be
an “outer” realm, while the mind of Poe, so to speak, remains pristine within a realm
analogous to the outermost, divine sphere of the “Primum Mobile.” Content thus
indicates form in “Silence, a Fable.” In fact, the narrator’s commentary on various
mythologies at the story’s end takes on new significance in this light, as Poe seems not
only to obscure authorial intention with these references, but to point to an infinite
number of finite fables—a paradox central to his vision of the cosmos as both “infinite” and “finite” simultaneously.

ii. Celestial Music as Lovers’ Conversation

The dialogic structure of “Silence, a Fable” recurs in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” except the latter completely lacks, and not simply minimizes, a traditional narrative voice. The structure of “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” imitates that of Plato’s *Dialogues*, or Petrarch’s *Secretum*, using conversation as a trope with which to present “two sides of the story”—in this case, the points of view of the lovers, Monos and Una, two angels who embody the ideal Petrarchan love affair previously satirized in “Ligeia.” The story is similar to “Silence, a Fable” in its self-referencing quality, insofar as the angelic dialogue of the lovers seems to refer to its setting, presumably the spheres situated below the “Primum Mobile,” where “celestial music” was believed to reflect the perfect functioning of the cosmic order. Having put Petrarchan love in its rightful place—that is, beyond the base natural realm—Poe suggests that the conversation of the two lovers is a component of that music, whose sound is not meant for human ears. The story’s form also adheres to its content in the way that it seems to delay the climactic moment of Monos’s death, as if to mimic his angelic ascent into the heavens.

One of the first observations one might make about Monos and Una is that they seem to behave like an old married couple: Monos begins the tale by trying to explain to Una that he was “born again” after death—but because the two appear to reside beyond ordinary time, one wonders if Una has heard this story several times before. In fact, she hints as much when she later says that she “remember[s] these conversations.”
Monos is affectionately dismissive of Una’s nostalgic reminiscing about their happy life on earth, their “earnest mutual love,” before death made it “painful to love,” telling her to “speak not of these griefs.” When she asks to know about the incidents leading to his demise, perhaps to be a good wife and companion to her husband, he assures her with a chivalric, but faintly patronizing tone, “When did the radiant Una ask anything of her Monos in vain?” He then interrupts her for “one word . . . in regard to man’s general condition,” which turns into an almost three-page lecture that is in part about the rise of cities and the ensuing corruption of nature. In this way, Poe transfers a rather “mundane” portrait of domestic peace far beyond earth into the outer spheres of heaven, employing the medieval technique of a jarring, though instructive juxtaposition, such as the depiction of the rape of Phoebe and Hilaria on the basilica in Rome. That the “happy couple” can live peaceably only in outer space may draw attention to Robertson’s assertion that medieval thinkers believed in a “non-dialectical relationship” between cupidinous and charitable love, or that one cannot attain a kind of divine love through corporal relationships. Poe thus appears to poke fun, once again, at the ideal of Petrarchan love by suggesting that it can only exist in heaven.

Despite its humorous insertion into the dialogue, Monos’s diatribe offers a genuine and elegant analysis of the decay of human civilization, which mankind’s “slumbering sense of the forced and far-fetched” allowed to happen:

[T]his evil sprang necessarily from the leading evil, Knowledge. Man could not both know and succumb. Meantime huge smoking cities arose, inumerable. Green leaves shrunk before the hot breath of furnaces. ..[I]t appears that we had
worked out our own destruction in the perversion of our taste, or rather of the blind neglect of its culture in the schools.320

Monos’s lecture builds upon themes found, again, in Poe’s “Eureka,” namely, the total annihilation of the universe, its collapse upon itself toward an unknown center. Monos indicates, however, that such destruction first takes the form of apparent progress, which in fact, disguises a “diseased commotion, moral and physical” and “elevates to power... the Arts... which “casts chains upon the intellect that made them.”321 Monos’s lament of the “Art-scarred surface of the Earth,”322 coupled with his high regard of Plato, who he deems to possess a “pure contemplative spirit and majestic intuition”323 amplifies the deeply nostalgic ethos that permeates his speech. In fact, Poe directly signals to the nostalgia for antiquity, by referring to the Romantic poets, who yearned for a simpler time:

And these men—the poets—living and perishing amid the scorn of the “utilitarians”—of rough pedants... pondered piningly, but not unwisely, upon the ancient days when our wants were not more simple than our enjoyments were keen—days when mirth was a word unknown, so solemnly deep-toned was happiness—holy, august and blissful days when blue rivers ran undammed, between hills unhewn, into far forest solitudes, primaeval, odorous, and unexplored.324

Una, in the manner of Ligeia, the spiritual teacher, tempers Monos’s passion with a reminder that he died not from the “fiery overthrow” of the apocalypse that he imagines, but “individually” from sickness, like most other men.325 She then offers a clue as to the kind of time that exists in heaven:
And though the century which has since elapsed, and whose conclusion brings us thus together once more, tortured our slumbering senses with no impatience of duration, yet, my Monos, it was a century still.\textsuperscript{326}

She seems to betray an awareness of time, but a simultaneous inability to feel its “duration,” also offering, rather mysteriously, that at the end of each “century,” she and Monos reunite. The effect of such extraordinary time is that it gives immediacy to the narrative, producing the sense that the lovers’ dialogue is a once-in-a-century opportunity. One is made to imagine a kind of time that lacks finite chronology, which Poe mentions in “Eureka,” especially since Monos is uncertain of the exact time of his death; he refers to it as “a point in the vague infinity,” only certain that “it was in the Earth’s dotage that [he] died.”\textsuperscript{327}

Indeed, the narrative itself, given its dialogic structure, also seems to lack finite chronology. In a moment where authorial voice seems again to emerge, Monos refers to his not knowing where to begin the “weird narrative.” In the brief exchange that follows, Una offers her own view of the story’s origin, since the precise instant of death is apparently unknowable:

Monos: [B]ut at what point shall the weird narrative begin?

Una: At what point?

Monos: You have said.

Una: Monos, I comprehend you. In Death we have both learned the propensity of man to define the undefinable. I will not say, then, commence with the moment of life’s cessation—but commence with the sad, sad instant when, the fever
having abandoned you, you sank into a breathless and motionless torpor, and I pressed down your pallid eyelids with the passionate fingers of love.\textsuperscript{328}

Una emerges as a loyal companion to Monos, one who has impressed upon his consciousness the instant of his death, otherwise only a “point in the vague infinity.” Her empathetic nature authorizes her to mark the instant of his death with a sensuous memory, that of her “fingers of love” pressing on his eyelids. It is a shared memory, and, for all intents and purposes, the only memory that counts for the two lovers. Embodying the eternal Petrarchan love relationship, Monos and Una are only able to relish their love from within in a timeless sphere. The spiritual aspect of their formerly physical relationship to one another has been preserved in the heavenly realm; they understand the experience of being pulled out of time based via the sensuous impressions they received at death, not through any logical deduction of death’s meaning.

A synaesthetic “delirium replete with ecstasy”\textsuperscript{329} ensued, blending his senses together with great intensity, and barring a logical explanation of his experience:

Taste and smell were inextricably confounded, and became one sentiment, abnormal and intense. . . The rays which fell upon the external retina, or into the corner of the eye, producing a more vivid effect than those which struck the front or interior surface. Yet, in the former instance, the effect was so far anomalous that I appreciated it only as sound—sound sweet or discordant as matters presenting themselves at my side were light or dark in shade.\textsuperscript{330}

Having transcended the realm of ordinary experience, Monos is unable describe his death as a precise moment in the history of his life. Indeed, that moment never seems fully to arrive. Despite hearing “Death” spoken by those who stood near him as he began to die,
he goes on to describe his death as a year-long process, which contained multiple climactic moments: the “wreck and chaos” of his wildly-changing sense perception, the moment at which the “hand of deadly Decay” struck his mortal body, his being lowered into the ground in a coffin, or the final moment in which he was delivered unto the “light of Love.”

Poe appears again to manipulate what Robertson refers to as “Romantic” standards of story-telling to allow for his “form” to reflect to his “content.” Since Monos’s death appears to occur over the course of at least four climactic moments, there is a sense in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” of a perpetual rising action. Popular opinion, however, dictates that a single climax ought to punctuate a period of tension to satisfy the audience’s sense of inevitability. That climax ought to be followed by resolution and denouement, which placate the reader with an apparent return to equilibrium and normalcy. Poe, however, uses the certainty of death as to hold his reader’s attention in abeyance of a climax that never actually arrives, thereby circumventing the need for a traditional resolution and denouement, since the experience of death, one might argue, is the ultimate form of resolution. Poe also employs the intriguing paradox of having the narrative issue from someone whose physical body is being buried, undergoing decay, and ostensibly becoming integrated into the earth. Monos, however, seems to hover above this process as he slowly ascends from Earth, perhaps realizing the message of Petrarch’s imagined St. Augustine to give up the “earthly tabernacle of the corruptible body” to achieve union with divinity. The ensuing result is the sense that Monos’s “weird narrative,” indeed Poe’s story itself, does not correspond simply to the unfolding of “plot” in the ordinary sense. Poe’s unusual plot
and its continually rising action is colored by his appropriation of medieval imagery and concepts, namely his subtle references to what appears to be the “music of the spheres,” or the “celestial music,” originally conceived by Pythagoras as a mathematical phenomenon reflecting the order of the heavens, and inaccessible to ordinary human sense perception. Monos’s experience of synaesthesia, which converts light into sound is as a kind of auditory ecstasy recurs when “issuing from the flame of each lamp . . . there flowed unbrokenly into [his] ears a strain of melodious monotone.” Again alluding to Bacon’s definition of beauty as “deviations from the true proportion,” Poe has Monos remark that the “irregularities of the clock upon the mantel, and of the watches of the attendants” came as sonorous “tickings” to his ears. The duration of these dissonant sounds, seeming as “violations of abstract truth,” occurred to him as an “idea” independent of “any succession of events.” Poe seems here to comment on his own manipulation of traditional standards on plot in the service of his desire to communicate certain ideas about consciousness – namely, that real metaphysical knowledge would require a overcoming of temporality, or chronological time. Indeed, the subtle references to a kind of “celestial music” indicate Monos’s ascent into the heavens and his transcendence of the temporal earthly realm—a distinctly upward-sloping progression reflecting the story’s uninterrupted rising action.

One implication of “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” (one of Poe’s three “angelic colloquys,” which also include the “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion” (1839) and “The Power of Words” (1845), which I will discuss next) is the idea that the angels’ dialogue reflects both the functioning of an ideal love relationship, as well as the “celestial music” thought to encompass the outer reaches of the cosmos. The “angelic
“colloquy” thus serves as another meeting-ground of Renaissance and medieval themes for Poe, intent on illuminating the common-denominator of disparate philosophies for the effect of poetic unity. Poe comments on the highly Platonic nature of Petrarchan love, implying its impossibility on Earth, by imagining its existence in the outermost spheres of the cosmos. But he also seems to satirize the medieval elevation of love via the typical gender roles of a love relationship; Monos’s chivalric bombast, and Una’s yielding femininity make the extraordinary ideal of love seem rather ordinary. Ironically, their “colloquial” exchange embodies the grandeur of “celestial music,” the dialogue a kind of melody in the midst of a silent narrator.

iii. Words as “Impulses Upon the Ether”

Poe presents his third “angelic colloquy” in “The Power of Words,” a story with a similar structure and premise as “The Colloquy of Monos and Una.” Two angels, Oinos and Agathos, reside in the heavens and discuss metaphysical topics pertaining to the attempts of mathematicians to understand the cosmos.

[T]he mathematicians of our globe. . . made the special effects, indeed wrought in the fluid by special impulses, the subject of exact calculation—so that it became easy to determine in what precise period an impulse of given extent would engirdle the orb, and impress (for ever) every atom of the atmosphere circumambient.

The confusing prose illustrates Poe’s satirical and disingenuous portrait of metaphysical speculation. The title of the story supplies a hint of its broader meaning and purpose, which only tangentially pertains to the supposed mathematical and scientific claims
presented here in jest. Much as in “Eureka,” Poe employs pseudo-scientific metaphors to elaborate vague intimations of universal truths. In this case, it is the general impression that words possess a certain power – itself a recurring theme in both “Silence, a Fable” and the “Colloquy of Monos and Una.” Agathos seems implicitly to compare “the special impulses” which mathematicians seek to identify “in the fluid,” itself an odd concept, to convey his personal conviction that “every word is an impulse upon the air,” which he uses synonymously with “ether.”

This view of words and language seems to build from Poe’s apparent desire to comment on the narrative itself, and his use of dialogue as the primary narrative vehicle. The conversation is essentially held in a kind of suspension, an effect created by the afore-mentioned “palpable absence” of the silent narrator. The dialogue, indeed, comparable to the “celestial music” of the heavens in its “physical power” is surrounded and defined by this ethereal silence. One critic has provided the useful qualification that Poe’s apparent belief in the “power of words” stems from an “uncertain grasp of the relation of language to feeling, and of feeling to nature” and not from the belief that language itself is reality. While this interpretation captures the tension between Romantic and Classical beliefs about language, it may fall short in showing how Poe displays his reverence for the Platonist or Plotinian philosophy of the “One and the Good,” and thus seems to give preference to Classical thought in this story. His choice to name the angels “Oinos,” meaning “one,” and Agathos, meaning “good” is the most immediate indication that he is relying on a neo-Classical frame of reference. Words—and by extension, the story’s dialogue comprise a form of “matter,” which, as has been shown, Plotinus perceives as subordinate to “form.” As an “impulse upon the air,” a
word is indeed seen as a physical entity, but that conclusion does not provide a satisfactory explanation of its supposed “power.” In the medieval sense, and we can infer, Poe’s sense, words as a kind of matter are still subject to and dependent upon the soul’s communication of form.

It is perhaps for this reason that Poe described words as “vague things” in the “Colloquy of Monos and Una,” as if to suggest the tentativeness of their power, that is, their contingency on the manner of expression, the intention of the speaker or writer, the audience which receives them. It is not enough for Poe to rely on the Romantic notion that words are direct outpourings of an inner soul, and in that sense, possess power. The vagueness appears to stem from the vital role which a silent narrator appears to occupy in stories solely featuring dialogue. There seems to be a need for a receptive mind to understand the ideas “behind” the words, to use a commonplace expression that nevertheless captures the crux of Augustine’s thought. The Classical thinker seems to perpetuate the vagueness of words’ power for the sake of refusing the superstitions about “sacred knowledge” (indeed, a corollary concept to the idea that “words possess physical power”) to which Gnostic thought would eventually fall prey.
V. Conclusion

As has been shown, Poe’s Gothic reimagining of the medieval cosmos plays a vital role in his fiction and philosophy. Indeed, a desire to revive neo-Classical thought seems to underlie his refusal of a simply Romantic worldview, or at least to meld medieval terms and imagery together with a Romantic ethos. He does so for the sake of a uniquely Gothic portrait of human struggles against a debased nature.

His metaphysical treatise, “Eureka,” illuminates his merging of medieval concepts with those of nineteenth-century science. Coupling atomic theory with his notion of matter’s intrinsic “sympathies” and “antipathies,” and blending visions of cosmic infinity with finitude, he demonstrates an almost Romantic effort to revive cosmology in the face of scientific progress.

His primary motive in employing medieval symbolism in “Ligiea” seems to be to reveal the Platonic denominator underlying Classical, medieval and Renaissance thought. As a writer who was never fully a part of what came to seem a circle of Romantics, because of his “Gothic” leanings, Poe expressed a positive desire to inhabit another time. Yet to revive the philosophy of antiquity seemed superfluous, as the future “Father of the American Gothic” could not simply copy Petrarch. Instead, he sets out to demonstrate Plato’s ubiquitous influence on medieval cosmology, showing how the prized notion of human “will” bears on the idea of the “supernatural.” Parodying the “Father of Humanism,” moreover, he presents Ligeia as a vampiric feminine archetype, perhaps one as enduring (though in a satirical sense) as the famed Laura of Petrarch’s sonnets.

Finally, from the viewpoint of these pages, Poe returns to themes explored in both “Eureka” and “Ligeia” in “Silence, a Fable,” “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” and
“The Power of Words,” stories which deal with the ideas of infinity and finitude in their treatments of life after death. He expounds upon the Platonic nature of Petrarchan love by positioning two angel lovers within the outer spheres of the cosmos. Remaining true to a principle of poetic unity, Poe demonstrates how his silent narrators enable his stories to exist as self-contained universes, similar to the finite medieval cosmos for which he appears to yearn.
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