Perverse, Anthropocentrism, and Posthumanism
in Two of Edgar Allan Poe's Stories

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Abstract

Industrialization revolutionizes human life and engenders anthropocentrism. Edgar Allan Poe ruminates on the repercussions of anthropocentrism in his stories and speculates about a posthumanist world. "The Imp of the Perverse" challenges the prevailing standard of reason and compels us to discover the underlying world that brings current situations into existence and legitimizes perverse phenomena. The three examples of the perverse, namely, circumlocution, procrastination, and abyss obsession, outline the latent coordinates of human identity: species, time, and space. The fourth instance recapitulates the three coordinates and features underdeveloped aspects. The abrupt ending of the story ("but where?") plunges readers into textual instability. "MS. Found in a Bottle" continues the journey of the suspended plunge: anthropocentric departure, disoriented temporality, multidimensional space. The juxtaposition of these two stories illuminates Poe's reflections on anthropocentric hubris and posthumanist speculation.

The 19th century witnessed the ascendency of anthropocentrism, which can be critiqued by means of the Anthropocene Epoch and the concept of posthumanism. The first category focuses on the decentralization of anthropocentrism and has a limited relationship with species, while the second primarily aims to transcend anthropocentrism and network humans with other species. First of all, anthropocentrism is closely associated with the Anthropocene, a "human-dominated, geological epoch."[1] According to Paul Crutzen, the concept of the Anthropocene came into existence in the late 18th century and ascended in influence in the 19th century. "The Anthropocene could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt's design of the steam engine in 1784."[2] Reason, as the most glorified human gift, exists not only in the abstract form of intelligence, but also crystalizes into concrete technologies that have revolutionized life on the planet and reinforced the belief in anthropocentrism. James Watt's steam engine, for example, is a crowning technological breakthrough and epitomizes one summit of human intelligence. It directly leads to the human conquest of both oceans and land, and becomes an impetus for industrialization. "Steam-powered ships and steam locomotives connected the globe and cut travel time to a fraction. Steam-powered factories increased production exponentially."[3] Anthropocentrism has also produced a negative influence on the environment, deeply widening the impact of human activities on climatic change. At its incipient stage, however, anthropocentrism is more about the glorification of human intelligence

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1   Paul Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature,* January 3 (2002): 23.

2   Crutzen, 23.

3   Daniel Rennie, "James Watt May Not Be the Best Known Inventor, But Without Him, the Modern World May Not Exist," *ATI* Feb. 14, 2019, https://allthatsinteresting.com/james-watt-steam-engine.

and accomplishments than environmental deterioration, as the extent of such damage became apparent only in hindsight.

This growing confidence in human intelligence (reason/logic) has led to more explorations into nature and more technological inventions, which in turn boost the hubris of human intelligence. This popular intellectual atmosphere prevails in Europe and the US and influences Poe's artistic creations. In short, human domination, technology, reason, and anthropocentrism, become a closed circle. If we want to topple anthropocentric hubris, one effective approach is to invalidate the over-glorified human intelligence—reason. This historical approach to anthropocentrism, in fact, does not engage many discussions of species.

The second approach is the posthumanist critique of anthropocentrism. According to Rosi Braidotti, posthumanism "contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the 'exceptionalism' of the Human as a transcendental category." It consists of three major branches: "becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine'"[4] Rather than an enclosed entity, human identity is in a constant process of "becoming": connected to and affected by nonhuman species. In this article, posthumanism is principally discussed in terms of becoming-animal and becoming-earth.

In relation to animals, anthropocentrism assumes that human beings are fundamentally different from animals because they are capable of language, reason, and tool-making, while nonhumans are incapable of these abilities. Therefore, reason, as well as its metamorphoses into logic, intelligence, and technology becomes a benchmark by which to define and measure human superiority over nonhuman animals. Second, human beings regard their perception of the world as the touchstone to measure all things. Observation integrates seeing and thinking, and thus epitomizes the anthropocentric perception of the world. Sigmund Freud regards sight and thinking as the mark that differentiates human beings from animals: the "assumption of an upright gait" enables men to look ahead and think ahead, and consequently leads to "the threshold of human civilization."[5] Observing things, analyzing underlying structures, and formulating human knowledge becomes the typical way humans perceive the world: seeing becomes inseparable from thinking. Moreover, in the anthropocentric view the visual world becomes the only existing reality. On the other hand, beneath the visual world, posthumanists argue, lies a multitude of realities that can be perceived by other species but can NOT be perceived by human beings, such as the kinetic world of horses, the olfactory world of dogs, the auditory world of bats, etc. In other words, humans would do well to decenter from their arrogance and embrace the agency of nonhuman species.

As for the world we live in, anthropocentrism regards the earth merely as resources to be exploited and the setting for humans to accomplish their achievements. Posthumanism, however, opposes this utilitarian approach and advocates due respect for the agency of the earth, as demonstrated in climate change and geological agency. For example, Robert Marzec introduces the concepts of "Deep Time" and "Deep Space" in an attempt to contextualize anthropocentrism. In comparison with the 4.5 billion years of the earth's history, the 130,000 years history of homo sapiens becomes insignificant, much less as the center of all things.[6] In addition, "Deep Space"

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4   Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 66.

5   Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents and Other Works" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, et al. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981): 99–100.

6   Robert P. Marzec, "Reflections on the Anthropocene Dossier," *Modern Fiction Studies* 64, no. 3 (2018): 585.

introduces a much broader spatial framework to reorient our thinking of the human position in the universe.

With the increasing popularity of anthropocentrism in the 1830s and 1840s, Poe became interested in the concept and it greatly influenced Poe's artistic creations. Poe makes light of scientific progress in several texts such as "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall," "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether," "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade," and "Mellonta Tauta." These tales all express a similar skepticism about human faith in reason, and they ostensibly offer an account of the development of Poe's posthumanist consciousness. The selection of "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "The Imp of the Perverse" for an in-depth discussion in this article is due to their complementary relationship. "MS." was first published in 1833—over a decade before "Imp." If "MS." explores the latent world of becoming, "Imp" concretizes the manifest content. For the sake of clarity, however, this article first discusses Poe's skepticism about anthropocentrism expressed in "Imp," then moves on to the more assured posthumanist orientation evident in "MS."

"The Imp of the Perverse" appeals to critics primarily as an examination of human psychology. The profundity of the story, Benjamin De Casseres contends, lies in its exploration of "one of the insoluble mysteries of the soul."[7] De Casseres epitomizes mainstream critical voices. John Mackinnon Robertson argues that Poe endeavors to reach a "synthesis of process of applied reason and psychal idiosyncrasy" and the perverse represents the reversed side of "an observing, reasoning, and energizing individual."[8] Likewise, Daniel Hoffman detects a similar pattern in Poe's stories: "the Imp of the Perverse, whose grotesque double is the Angel of the Odd."[9] Rather than harmonization, Chris Beyers argues for the "disassociation of the division of the self" as Poe's protagonists regard their other half "as a treacherous nemesis."[10] Furthermore, Joris-Karl Huysmans accentuates the overwhelming power of perverse tendency and its subduing effect on the volition, or as he terms it, the "lethargy of the will."[11] John Tresch holds the same opinion. "Poe delights in pulling the rug out from under his characters" and undermines "the assumption upon which they thought they could stand."[12] Thus, the purpose of the titular tale, Paul Fisher informs readers, is critiquing "deeper nineteenth-century constructions of selfhood that mythologized the power of bourgeois will."[13]

Kevin J. Hayes offers a new perspective to the current scholarship on this short story. "The Imp of the Perverse" anticipates surrealism features in paintings and forecasts many avant-garde impulses: "to pervert accepted notions of art and try new approaches and techniques, to

7   Benjamin De Casseres, *New York Journal-American*, 1271, qtd. in introduction to "The Imp of the Perverse" in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* III, ed., Thomas Mabbott (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1978): 1217–1219.

8   John Mackinnon Robertson, "Poe: New Essays Towards a Critical Method" in *Bloom's Classic Critical Views: Edgar Allan Poe,* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008): 136–144.

9   Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972): 208.

10   Chris Beyers, "Byron" in *Edgar Allan Poe in Context*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013): 258.

11   Joris-Karl Huysmans, "À Rebours" in *Bloom's Classic Critical Views: Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008), 78.

12   John Tresch, "Extra! Extra! Poe Invents Science Fiction!" in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004): 124.

13   Paul Fisher, "Alcohol, Addiction, and Rehabilitation" in *Edgar Allan Poe in Context*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 103.

juxtapose unexpected images, to defy rational expectations, to celebrate the absurd."[14] Insightful as this is, Hayes' general analogy fails to offer a substantial interpretation of major events in the story. Arthur Brown reads the story as "the literal performance of death itself."[15] He further opines that it concretizes a perverse impulse "to tell what cannot, or should not, be told [death]." Poe's tale embodies the struggling conflict between "undying death" and its "perpetual existence in letters."[16] While Brown's reading is edifying, his "death" interpretation only accounts for a small proportion of the story, and leaves untouched a number of primary examples of the perverse such as circulation and procrastination. Indeed, a systematic investigation of the text reveals that the perverse in the story ushers readers into its veiled world. This essay argues that perverseness challenges the anthropocentric standard of reason and compels us to discover the underlying posthumanist world that has brought the extant society into being and legitimizes perverse phenomena. Further, "MS. Found in a Bottle" complements "The Imp of the Perverse," and together these stories outline Poe's speculations on anthropocentrism and posthumanism.

I. The Perverse as an Anthropocentric Challenge

Perversion defies the validity of reason and implies a critique of anthropocentrism.[17] Anthropocentrism regards reason as an exclusive privilege for the human species and advocates the centrality of human beings amongst all things on Earth. Anthropocentrism is symbiotic with the intellectual milieu of 19th century America and has an indelible influence on Poe's literary creations. From 1838 to 1842, the U.S. launched a series of "Wilkes Expeditions" to explore the Pacific Northwest. With these expeditions human footprints were made on uncharted territories, and previously undiscovered knowledge was acquired about unknown waters. In 1844, the experimental telegraph line from Washington to Baltimore overcame temporal distance and nearly instantaneous communication was realized. In the 1840s, the whistling locomotive transported goods from city to city, breaking down regional barriers, thus strengthening the "promise of national unity and social equality," and epitomizing the most telling sign of "the Mechanical Age" of American society.[18] Technology, science, and the machines of the 19th century as various manifestations of rationality fueled anthropocentric (over)confidence in human intelligence and accomplishments. Poe weaves these anthropocentric repercussions into his stories and simultaneously goes beyond their perimeters.

"The Imp of the Perverse" exemplifies such a critique of anthropocentrism. Perverseness challenges the primacy of reason and compels us to reexamine anthropocentrism: "In the pure

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14 Kevin J. Hayes, "One-man Modernist" in *Cambridge Companion to Poe*, 237.

15 Arthur A. Brown, "Death and Telling in Poe's 'The Imp of the Perverse," *Studies in Short Fiction* 31, no.2 (1974): 197.

16 Brown, "Death and Telling," 198.

17 It is human intelligence in the form of technology, or human reason/logic in essence that is at the root of anthropocentrism. In this sense, perverseness challenges human intelligence, invalidates reason, and consequently critiques anthropocentrism. Perverseness, however, is more than a critique of anthropocentrism; it is incompatible with the current system of anthropocentrism and urges us to discover the underlying system "that call[s] the works into being?" (Poe III, 1220).

18 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964, Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 210.

arrogance of reason, we have all overlooked it."[19] Even if we confront the perverse with our rigid mind, we still feel perplexed by its elusive incomprehensibility. Reason follows logical steps and reaches a teleological purpose. To rationality, perverseness represents merely "a paradoxical something" and "a contradiction" to logic. The perverse has "no comprehension of the principle." "It is, in fact, a mobile without motive, a motive not motivirt."[20] This primitive force neither acknowledges cause-and-effect, nor does it "admit of analysis, or resolution into ulterior elements."[21] "We could not perceive its necessity," the narrator continues, "we could not have understood in what manner it might be made to further the objects of humanity, either temporal or eternal."[22] Perverseness challenges not only reason itself, but also the metamorphoses of reason in diverse fields. In the field of ethics, "the moralists" value the teleological end of goodness, but perverseness possesses an overwhelming propensity "to do wrong for the wrong's sake."[23] In the domain of science, phrenology, which follows logic, enjoyed an honorable status in the 1840s: "In the matter phrenology, for example, we first determined, naturally enough, that it was the design of the Deity that man should eat. We then assigned to man an organ of alimentiveness."[24] Perverseness contradicts the logic of phrenology and eschews any tentative rationalization. Further, phrenology circumscribes combativeness within the ambit of self-defense and obeys the principle of "safeguard against injury."[25] Perverseness shatters the principle of phrenology and becomes "a radical, a primitive impulse—elementary." In the case of "perverseness, the desire to be well is not only not aroused, but a strongly antagonistical sentiment exists." In short, "the spirit of the Perverse" can be summarized into one sentence: "there is no intellectual principle."[26]

Poe through the mouthpiece of the narrator predicts expected criticisms from detractors: perverseness has an ephemeral existence and one that dissolves quickly. The narrator, therefore, outlines an escalating intensity of propensity. Instead of fading away, in most cases the perverse "becomes absolutely irresistible."[27] Our deliberate attempts to repress it do nothing but turn it into "one unconquerable force which impels us, and alone impels us to its prosecution." Finally, this force has an "overwhelming tendency" to pamper itself, regardless of consequential disasters. "The impulse increases to a wish, the wish to a desire, the desire to an uncontrollable longing, and the longing is indulged."[28]

The obtrusiveness of the perverse obliges us to reexamine reason and the extant world that installs reason as the benchmark of anthropocentrism. One effective way to initiate this discussion is Bill Brown's "thing theory." "The discovery of a new kind of object in the eighteenth century,

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19 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Imp of the Perverse" in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* III, ed. Thomas Mabbott (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1978): 1219.

20 Poe, "Imp," 1220.

21 Poe, "Imp," 1221.

22 Poe, "Imp," 1219.

23 Poe, "Imp," 1221.

24 Poe, "Imp," 1219.

25 Poe, "Imp," 1221.

26 Poe, "Imp," 1221, 1223.

27 Poe, "Imp," 1220.

28 Poe, "Imp," 1222.

the fossil, enabled romanticism to recognize and to refigure its relation to the mortal limits of the natural world."[29] Like the newly discovered fossil in the eighteenth century, the unclassifiability of perverseness becomes a vantage point by which we are detached from our familiar society and incited into discovering the underlying world that brings current situations into existence.[30] These perverted phenomena, the narrator informs readers, are the gateways to guide us to unearth the concealed world. "If we cannot comprehend God in his visible works, how then in his inconceivable thoughts, that call the works into beings?" Moreover, time also constrains our comprehension, and we should parenthesize the current situation within the whole spectrum of developmental phases. "If we cannot understand him in his objective creatures, how then in his substantive moods and phases of creation?"[31] Anthropocentrism is based on the notion of the infallibility on human intelligence, and human knowledge of the world is regarded as simply the way the world unfolds itself. One basic fact, however, is overlooked with this view: the human perception/knowledge of the world is merely the experience of one species, and other species have utterly different perceptions of the same world. Therefore, "'to understand' the animal," Cary Wolfe urges us that we have to "stand 'under,' not above her—by surrendering the dream of mastery troped as vision."[32] The question is since human beings are entrenched in their way of thinking, how can they be made to "stand under, not above" nonhuman species? This is the function of perverseness. Perverseness cannot be classified into the pre-existing structure of knowledge, and becomes a standpoint to reflect on the validity of human knowledge, compelling us to find a larger framework to explain its existence. This larger framework, which should accommodate both human and nonhuman experiences of the world, is what posthumanism terms "transcending anthropocentrism."

II. The Perverse as a Threshold

Poe employs four examples to demonstrate his understanding of the perverse. These seemingly random cases are artistically orchestrated in a progression from anthropocentrism to posthumanism. The first three instances define human identity in three essential coordinates: species, time, and space. The final example recapitulates the previous features and reveals an underlying posthumanist world.

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29 Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry,* 28.1 (2001): 1–22, 16.

30 Anthropocentrism regards human beings as the only species capable of agency and human perception of the world is viewed as the exact way nature unfolds itself. In contrast, posthumanists argue that different species have different perceptions of the same world and formulate different realities. For example, dogs have extremely sensitive olfactory organs and they live in an olfactory world that cannot be experienced by human beings. Similarly, there are other realities perceived by other species: the echolocations of bats (the auditory world), the kinetic world of horses, and seismic communications among elephants, to name but a few. Likewise, human beings, as only one species of many, also have their unique way of understanding the world. As the primary means by which human beings know the world, sciences epitomize this perfect integration of seeing and thinking: frequent observations enable us to penetrate through the surface into the underlying structures or laws. The results we gain from experiments, if corroborated by other scientists, become knowledge.

31 Poe, "Imp," 1220.

32 Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003), 5.

Circumlocution is Poe's first example of the perverse.[33] The speaker could have expressed his message in a straightforward manner, but he is possessed by "an earnest desire to tantalize a listener by circumlocution," employing his utmost efforts in restraining "the most laconic and luminous language [which] is struggling for utterance upon his tongue."[34] This perverse phenomenon of wrapping the information in layers and layers of verbiage reveals the speaker's yearning for personal bonds with members of his species. Ross Chambers provides a penetrating analysis of the issue: narration exchanges information for attention. A narrator offers some information to a narratee, who in turn devotes concentrated attention to the story. Since the narratee's interest in the story is gradually shifted to the storyteller and "narration implies an act of seduction, and a certain transfer of interest (on the narratee's part) from the information content to the narrating instance itself (be it the person of the narrator, as in 'real-life' situations, or, as in the reading situation, the narrative discourse itself)."[35]

The longer the duration of the narrative, the more intense the interpersonal bond becomes. The unfolding of the narration jeopardizes the advantageous position of the narrator, who is depleting his information and losing the hold of the narratee's attention. To avoid the final divulgence of his information or secret, the narrator employs many digressions to maintain the narratee's interest. Likewise, the speaker in Poe's story employs circumlocution, which has a similar function as digressions, i.e. to lengthen his narration and intensify their interpersonal bonds, albeit in an unpleasant manner. In fact, love and hatred are two sides of the same coin: an ardent interpersonal connection. Furthermore, Poe also resorts to spatial language to visualize interpersonal bonds and their ripple effects on social networks. "The thought strikes him that by certain involutions and parentheses, this anger may be engendered."[36] "Parentheses," as inserted sentences in communications, digress from the theme of the discourse, prolong the conversation and deepen interpersonal connections. "Involutions" visualize the process of entangling the information with layers and layers of verbiage and produce a spatial impression of forever expanding circles. This portrayal accurately recapitulates Poe's message. The perverse activity of circumlocution invites people to explore the latent world that produces these puzzling phenomena. Circumlocution dramatizes the speaker's longing to build up strong interpersonal connections with those of the same species. Both the speaker and listener have their own network of social ties, and the new establishment of intense personal bonds between the speaker and listener such as love and hatred will exert ripple effects on their social network of interpersonal relationships.

The second case of the perverse concretizes the definition of "human" in terms of time. Some urgent task needs to be performed today, but we postpone it until tomorrow. When tomorrow

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33   Most people do not regard circumlocution as a sign of perverseness. The question then becomes why does Poe think it is? The same question can also be directed at two other forms of perverseness: procrastination and the obsession with the abyss. If we piece together these three forms of perverseness (circumlocution, procrastination, abyss obsession), we will discover one shared feature: the challenge to logic/reason. Moreover, if we take the whole story into consideration, Poe's message emerges: beneath the surface of the perverse lies a much broader world that produces both our experience of the world and nonhuman perceptions of the world.

34   Poe, "Imp," 1221.

35   Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 51.

36   Poe, "Imp," 1221–2.

arrives, so does a "nameless" and "unfathomable craving for delay." Furthermore, "this craving gathers strength as the moments fly" and culminates in our complete abandonment.[37] The perverse phenomenon of procrastination provides a vantage point for us to reconsider the nature of time. Time follows a linear procession and anchors the present to allow retrospection into the past. With temporal progression, the past gradually fades away and vanishes into nothing. Procrastination concretizes a willingness to stick to the status quo and it precludes changes. It anchors its foothold in the past, witnesses the progressing trajectory of temporality, and establishes a strong connection between past and present.[38]

Procrastination challenges the authoritarian understanding of time as linear progress and offers an alternative possibility: linear structure is just one of many manifestations of the temporal. The narrator envisions such a layered entity of temporality. "The last hour for action is at hand. We tremble with the violence of the conflict within us, —of the definite with the indefinite—of the substance with the shadow. But, if the contest have [sic] proceeded thus far, it is the shadow which prevails, —we struggle in vain.[39] In this intriguing metaphor, the narrator links the undertaken task with the linear procession of time, and compares them to "the definite." On the other hand, the postponed project and the status quo are compared to be "the infinite."[40] The definite is merely one manifestation of the infinite, and likewise, the linear procession of time—what is generally believed to be the universal form—only represents one dimension of polymorphous temporality. The analogy of "the substance and the shadow" further consolidates this interpretation. The substance, as the foregrounded section, emerges from the background of the shadow; in a similar vein, linear time, which human beings can perceive and experience, also rises from the invisible background of eternity that brings visible objects into existence. The prevailing of shadow over substance testifies to the invisible omnipresence of the veiled world, a concept that will be explored in the fourth section of the essay. It is the perverse, in this case procrastination, that dramatizes the fissure and marshals us to explore the uncharted regions.

The third example of the perverse is closely associated with space. When we stand upon the edge of a precipice and "peer into the abyss," our immediate response is horror. Yet we do not shrink away from the cliff, and the initial terror and dizziness gradually "become merged in a cloud of unnameable [sic] feeling."[41] The narrator deliberately fuses the description of geological differences with the corresponding feelings they have induced in readers. The precipice is a tangible and concrete reality, engendering an unambiguous feeling of horror. In contrast, the abyss beneath the precipice is a completely unknown world, emitting mysterious mist and enveloping the surroundings. "Out of this our cloud upon the precipice's edge, there grows into palpability, a shape." The tangible reality is just an emerging part of the unknown abyss and its appearance; to a large degree this is contingent upon the mysterious mist. It is the perverse that encourages

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37 Poe, "Imp," 1222.

38 The discussion of procrastination might in itself be trivial. This triviality, however, serves as a step to lead the readers to discover the underlying temporal framework, which, along with two other forms of perverseness, reveals the constituting pillars of human identity: species, time, and space.

39 Poe, "Imp," 1222.

40 Poe, "Imp," 1222.

41 Poe, "Imp," 1222.

us to go beyond the current confinement to explore the concealed world. "It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height."[42] This perverse "plunge" from the cliff arouses human curiosity about exploring uncharted territories. Alain Corbin regards the cliff as "the zone of contact" between two different worlds, with the mad plunge symbolizing an "aerial journey along the cliffs bordering the depths of the abyss."[43] One work by Poe's contemporary Heinrich Heine from 1826 captured people's popular sentiments toward precipices in time: "It seems to me that I once stood in such a way on high looking down, but that, seized with dizziness and fright, I then fell down to earth."[44]

If transcending anthropocentrism is the goal of posthumanism, then decentering anthropocentrism is the starting point. The three forms of perverseness in Poe's story enable us to confront human limitations. First of all, circumlocution violates the linear logic of "sender-message-receiver" and foregrounds the insufficiency of reason, the most cherished quality of anthropocentrism. It also compels us to go beyond the enclosed self to embrace the unfolding of the self to network with others. If this form of perverseness exposes a hidden reality beneath the surface, then procrastination re-orients our cognition of time.

Secondly, procrastination challenges the anthropocentric concept of temporality. An immediate implementation of our plans means to impose human will on reality (anthropocentrism), and therefore, procrastination defies human will. Besides, it also challenges human cognition of time as a linear progression, and suggests an alternative concept of nonlinear temporality that connects human beings to a larger temporal framework shared by both human and nonhuman species, such as Deep Time.

The third form of perverseness in Poe's story, abyss obsession, reconfigures the human understanding of space. The obsession with the void foregrounds the image of the "aerial flight" from the visible space (cliff) to the invisible space (abyss). It evinces the eagerness to escape the visible reality perceived by human beings as well as accentuates the passage and connection to unknown territories. Poe actually portrays this posthumanist endeavor to leave the land (anthropocentric hierarchy), to voyage in the ocean (fluidity/decentering), and to journey in outer space (concentric circles) in his stories.

III. The Agential Presence of Background

The examples of perverse are orchestrated in a logical procedure, with a distinct accentuation in each case. The first instance reveals an individual desire to establish interpersonal bonds with other species members and hence the unfolding of the self in interacting with others. The second and third incidents demonstrate the functions of time and space on the constitution of human identity, albeit in an underdeveloped manner. The last occurrence condenses the essence of these three episodes and features the underdeveloped dimensions in the previous ones.

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42 Poe, "Imp," 1223.

43 Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World 1750–1840,* trans. Jocelyn Phelps (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 159.

44 Quoted in Corbin, 169.

The narrator discovers a unique method of murder without any risk of detection. The targeted victim has a habit of reading by candlelight in an ill-ventilated apartment, so the narrator stealthily inserts a poisonous wax light in the bedroom candle-stand, which kills the victim and allows the narrator to inherit his estate. The estate becomes not only a dwelling habitat but also a chamber of his innermost secret. Free from the shadow of being detected, the narrator leads a peaceful life, frequently "sauntering along the streets" and then returning to his inherited apartment.[45]

His regular shuttling from "the crowded thoroughfares" to his chamber exerts an influence on his identity. To explicate the influence of spatial agency on the construction of human psychology, it is necessary to introduce some key concepts of Jacques Lacan. An infant, Lacan contends, has no sense of self during the first six months after the birth, and identifies itself with anything in the adjacent space that provides it with comfort, such as a warm blanket, a milk bottle, or even a pleasing toy. Lacan describes this inchoate "I" as the randomly flowing "hommelette" in terms of "the membranes of the egg in which the foetus emerges on its way to becoming a new-born are broken."[46] Gradually, the infant prioritizes the mother's breast as its primary identifying object due to the frequent maternal feedings, and thus distinguishes itself from the surrounding environment. This spatial differentiation indicates the infant's progression from the Real to the Imaginary and paves the way for the Symbolic. Lacan compares the infant's psychological development to mimicry. Becoming a part of the background engenders a sense of belonging and produces a feeling of euphonic coexistence. However, after a certain temporal span, the amicable symbiosis poses the risk of annihilating its uniqueness; the organism changes its coloration and differentiates itself from the surrounding environment. The distinction satisfies the need for individuality, yet it also incubates a sense of isolation, which again propels the organism to revert to mimicry.[47] Likewise, space plays a constructive role in the formation of the narrator's identity in Poe's story. His frequent "sauntering" in "the crowded thoroughfares" is his way of camouflage, as described by Lacan, i.e. he blurs into the adjacent space and gains a sense of belonging. And his returning to the dwelling chamber, throughout which the secret permeates, provides him with a sense of idiosyncrasy. The shuttles between these geological locations have, in the words of Lacan, "a formative force" in the narrator's self.[48]

In addition to space, temporal agency also begins to emerge. The seemingly perfect crime fosters an enormous feeling of delight for the narrator. His ingenious scheme and perfect execution bespeak the narrator's intelligence and intimate his complete mastery over the situation. "It is inconceivable how rich a sentiment of satisfaction arose in my bosom as I reflected upon my absolute security."[49] Gradually his assessment begins to change. "But there arrived at length an epoch, from which the pleasurable feeling grew, by scarcely perceptible gradations, into a haunting and harassing thought." The same person, the same event, the same place – the only difference is the passage of time. The transformation from an "inconceivable" delight to a "harassing" burden

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45 Poe, "Imp," 1225.

46 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alain Sheridan. (N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1979), 197.

47 Lacan, *Four Concepts*, 73.

48 Lacan, 73.

49 Poe, "Imp," 1224.

concretizes the illustration of the agency of temporality. Moreover, the agency of time grows in degrees and finally erupts in an overwhelming fashion. Initially, the "harassing" burden occasionally attacks the narrator and becomes "a maddening desire to shriek aloud," and finally incarnates into "the pangs of suffocation." "Could I have torn out my tongue, I would have done it."[50]

Time and space have played an essential role in shaping human identity; the manifestation of their agency in the story, this paper argues, reveals the seeds of posthumanism in Poe's speculative world. Posthumanism is a paradigm shift in decentering anthropocentrism. Scholars have placed different emphases in their understandings of posthumanism. Cary Wolfe defines posthumanism chiefly as the agency of non-human species (especially animals), while Robert P. Marzec zooms anthropocentrism out to include the wider spectrum of "deep time" and the geological agency of planets for reconsideration.[51] As for N. Katherine Hayles, prosthesis blurs the boundary between humans and androids, and anthropocentric reality is merely virtuality of "the computational universe."[52] Despite these divergent critical foci, all posthumanist theorists share some basic tenets such as anthropocentric decentering and transcending, nonhuman agency, and species respect, the characteristics which constitute the definition of posthumanism in this article. Posthumanist endeavors to decenter anthropocentrism and advocate nonhuman agency find full expression in Poe's stories. Time and space constitute our living environment, an environment which for anthropocentrism is simply "a silent and passive backdrop to" the historical narratives of human beings.[53] Time and space, as constitutional components of the environment, become a stage for human performance, as they themselves have no "agentive presence" in human accomplishments.[54] However, Poe turns the "silent and passive backdrop" into a loud and active foreground and reveals the "agentive presence" of time and space in human identity and activities. Temporality contradicts the narrator's intention and crushes his determination. Space shapes human cognition of species differentiation and environmental camouflage within the first six months of life, and thus builds up a primitive sense of self. Poe's story dramatizes the perverse and ushers us into the latent posthumanist world in a move that brings the current reality into existence and justifies the phenomena of perverseness.

As it progresses, the story appears to steadily march toward an anticipated closure. Toward the very end of the tale, however, Poe abruptly puts forward a series of questions that cast everything into suspension: "But why shall I say more? To-day I wear these chains, and am here! To-morrow I shall be fetterless! – *but where*?"[55] The conclusion recapitulates the contents of the previous examples, namely, circumlocution, procrastination, abyss obsession, and culminates in the last crushing question with great emphasis: "— *but where*?" This spatial uncertainty reverberates with the paused plunge and awaits our exploration of the unknown universe.

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50 Poe, "Imp," 1226.

51 Robert P. Marzec, "Reflections on the Anthropocene Dossier," *Modern Fiction Studies* 64, no. 3 (2018): 591.

52 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 254.

53 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," *Critical Inquiry*, 35.2 (2009): 204.

54 Chakrabarty, "Climate of History," 205.

55 Poe, "Imp," 1226.

IV. A Posthumanist Glimpse of the Universe

"MS. Found in a Bottle" answers the question suspended by the narrator in "the Imp of the Perverse" and reveals the underlying world beneath the anthropocentric façade. The narrator in "MS. Found in a Bottle" boards onto "a beautiful ship of about four hundred tons" and continues the suspended exploration.[56] A huge ship is a floating version of the anthropocentric world. The vessel functions through a hierarchical existence, such as the Captain, First Mate, Sailing Master, and other crew members. In a temporal dimension, the sailors follow shift rotations to maintain optimal mechanical operation. On a geographic dimension, the linear departs "from the port of Batavia," follows a scheduled route, and aims to reach the destination "of the Archipelago of the Sunda islands."[57]

After many days of the voyage, a midnight hurricane deluges the cabins and destroys the ship. An old Swede and the narrator become "the sole survivors of the accident" on the wrecked hulk.[58] The shipwreck undermines the anthropocentric ground and sets everything adrift in uncertainty. Patrizia Muscogiuri describes the shipwreck as a disruptive "sea-change" that "constitutes the psychic death of (social) identity, of the 'I' with all its logocentric constructions."[59] After the collapse of the anthropocentric world, the two survivors continue their drifting for five days. "We waited in vain for the arrival of the sixth day—that day to me has not arrived."[60] The first shipwreck ushers the survivors into an existence with different temporality. "Thenceforward we were enshrouded in pitchy darkness." Time in the anthropocentric world manifests itself as a linear procession and assists people in structuring their perception of the past, present, and future. Further, people regard the linear logic of temporality as the unshakeable ballast of their life's structure and build their activities and accomplishments on that solid bedrock. It is for this reason that the narrator in "the Imp of the Perverse" repeatedly accentuates the process of schedule, implementation, and outcome. "We had a task before us which must be speedily performed." "We are consumed with eagerness to commence the work, with the anticipation of whose glorious result our whole souls are on fire."[61] The immediate execution of a task foregrounds linear temporal logic, turns a human design into reality, and imprints human marks on the altered world. Any delay becomes a potential challenge to this anthropocentric scenario. The perverse craving for delay ruptures this seamless fusion between anthropocentric pride and temporal linearity. Poe highlights the troublesome situation as an escalating conflict. "We tremble with the violence of the conflict within us, –of the definite with the indefinite—of the substance with the shadow. But, if the contest have [sic] proceeded thus far, it is the shadow which prevails, –we struggle in vain."[62] If we follow Poe's analogy of "the substance with the shadow," we might arrive at the conclusion that "Perverse"

56   Edgar Allan Poe, "MS. Found in a Bottle" in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* II: 130–47, 135.

57   Poe, "MS," 135.

58   Poe, "MS," 137.

59   Patrizia A. Muscogiuri, "Cinematographic Seas" in *Fictions of the Sea*, ed. Bernhard Klein (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002): 208.

60   Poe, "MS," 138.

61   Poe, "Imp," 1222.

62   Poe, "Imp," 1222.

accentuates the "substance" aspect while "MS." stresses the "shadow" side. Following temporal linearity and fulfilling a pre-established task concretize human accomplishments in the form of "the substance," and refusing temporal progression and sticking to the status quo indicates the "shadow" side of time. The seeming coincidence between the demolishment of anthropocentrism and the appearance of eternal darkness conceals Poe's speculations on time. Anthropocentrism claims human domination over other species and maintains faith in in "this clock-regulated world."[63] The shipwreck deprives human beings of control and puts them at the mercy of the enraged ocean. With the diminishment of human agency, time recedes from its manifest aspect of linearity and reveals its shadow dimension of perpetual darkness. "Eternal night continues to envelop us" and "we had no means of calculating time."[64]

The first shipwreck throws the survivors into a nonlinear temporal existence, and the second devastation ushers the narrator into a space with multiple dimensions. The old Swede and the narrator continue their drifting on "the stump of the mizzen-mast" until they collide with a gigantic ship of four thousand tons. The crash kills the Swede and hurls the remaining survivor unto the rigging of the descending mass. This alien space compels the narrator to confront human limitations and anthropocentric deficiency. "What she is not, I can easily perceive—what she is I fear it is impossible to say."[65] The narrator's easy perception of "what she is not" evinces the insufficiency of human knowledge: the strange vessel completely defies the current ken and withstands classification into established categories. And the impossibility of defining "what she is" amplifies her elusiveness and highlights human ignorance.

This terrible ship produces a nameless feeling within the narrator. It is "a sensation which will admit of no analysis, to which the lessons of by-gone times are inadequate, and for which I fear futurity itself will offer me no key."[66] The narrator aligns past with present and future as an unbroken spectrum to negate the putative comprehensibility of humans. This forces a confrontation with anthropocentric deficiency. Instead of being the center, human beings are of course just one of many species in the world, and have a limited species understanding of the world. Each species has special organs to perceive the multidimensional world and construct its unique reality on which it builds up its meaningful life. "Organs are contrivances by which the individual is brought into sensible relation with particular classes and forms of matter, to the exclusion of other classes and forms."[67] Different species have disparate sensory organs of perception and formulate diverse realities of the same world. Diverse as these species standards are, they are all ontologically equal.[68] Anthropocentrism anoints the human standard as the universal yardstick to measure non-human species and ignores species distinction. Poe thus deliberately points out the deficiency of human

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63 Muscogiuri, "Cinematographic Seas," 208.

64 Poe, "MS," 139.

65 Poe, "MS," 142.

66 Poe, "MS," 141.

67 Edgar Allan Poe, "Mesmeric Revelation" in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* III, ed. Thomas Mabbott: 1204–42, 1037.

68 Quan Wang makes a detailed analysis of species perception, contending that "people often indulge in the ostensibly transparent world and forget the limits of human perception" (85). For more information, see Quan Wang, "A Posthumanist Reading of 'The Sphinx' and 'Mesmeric Revelation,'" *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 21, no.1 (2022): 77–95.

cognition. "The organs of man are adapted to his rudimental condition, and to that only" and "the external world" perceived through the "idiosyncrasy" of human organs, is "limited."[69] The acknowledgment of species' limits as well as the decentering from anthropocentrism, enables human beings to explore the world from a fresh perspective. "Are such things the operation of ungoverned Chance?"[70] The strange things on this curious ship concretize the manifestations of "ungoverned Chance," which in turn contradicts the anthropocentric worship of reason. Rationality thus ceases to function as the only means to understand the world.

This anthropocentric relinquishment leads to new explorations. The narrator carelessly daubs a studding-sail with a tar brush. "The thoughtless touches of the brush are spread out into the word DISCOVERY." Consequently, the narrator makes a series of discoveries about this alien space. The narrator walks among a group of the crew on this curious ship. "They paid me no manner of attention, and, although I stood in the very midst of them all, seemed utterly unconscious of my presence."[71] The narrator "I" was able to watch the activities of the crew, but they could not see him. Several worlds coexist in the same space. The visibility of one particular world does not entail the totality of spatial existence, and the invisibility of the other world(s) does not mean their nonexistence. The multidimensional world, contingent upon the idiosyncratic organs of various species, reveals itself as polymorphous manifestations. In addition, this peculiar space legitimizes the existence of perverse phenomena. The timbers of the ship are made of a strange material, which if we follow human logic is most unfitting for the purpose of a voyage due to: "its extreme porousness." To the narrator's astonishment, the porous timber unbelievably survives "the worm-eaten condition which is a consequence of navigation in these seas" and "the rottenness attendant upon age." This unusual space justifies not only the existence of the perverse but also that of the absurd and mysterious. As "a miracle of miracles," the enormous ship is "doomed to hover continually upon the brink of Eternity, without taking a final plunge into the abyss." In addition, lifeless things reveal their agency and become the partners of human beings in this space. "There is a sea where the ship itself will grow in bulk like the living body of the seaman."[72]

The first and second shipwrecks usher readers into a world with different time and space, and the third shipwreck plunges them into darkness.[73] Toward the denouement, the ship is "lifted bodily from out" the howling rampant sea, then "plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool," and "going down" into the abyss of the swallowing maelstrom.[74] The story abruptly ends here. Poe withholds his description of further occurrences and throws readers into textual darkness. However, Poe leaves seminal and cryptic clues to indicate the forthcoming enigma. "Stupendous ramparts

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69 Poe, "Mesmeric Revelation," 1038.

70 Poe, "MS," 142.

71 Poe, "MS," 143.

72 Poe, "MS," 142–3.

73 Yanyan Zhu and Quan Wang briefly mention these shipwrecks in "The Shipwreck Discovery in 'MS. FOUND IN A BOTTLE." The focus of their essay, however, is to discuss the methods of delivering shipwrecked discoveries to the world, while the present paper aims to explore the function of the perverse as a threshold to usher readers into the underlying world beneath the anthropocentric façade. In addition, this article includes full-length discussions of procrastination and the veiled world of temporality, species perception of reality, and the latent multidimensional space. For more information, please refer to Yanyan Zhu and Quan Wang, "The Shipwreck Discovery in 'MS. FOUND IN A BOTTLE," *Explicator* 76, no. 3 (2018): 133.

74 Poe, "MS," 145–6.

of ices, [are] towering away into the desolate sky, and looking like the walls of the universe." The walls stand between the narrator and the enigmatic universe and screen "some exciting knowledge" of the cosmos. If the narrator could discover the arcane portal and go through the walls, he would be able to "penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions" and access "some never-to-be-imparted secret." At that moment, "the ice opens suddenly to the right, and to the left, and we are whirling dizzily, in immense concentric circles, round and round the borders of a gigantic amphitheatre, the summit of whose walls is lost in the darkness and the distance."[75]

Poe's innovative image of "concentric circles" appeals to many scholars, who have explored it from the perspectives of biography, psychology, and cosmology, to name but a few. Benjamin Franklin Fisher interprets the whirlpool effect as the result of a "drunkards' tale" which is told to entertain the members of "the Folio Club."[76] Marie Bonaparte reads the story as a primordial fantasy of "the return-to-the-womb."[77] Profound as these interpretations are, they fail to confront the literal aspects of the event. Richard D. Finholt asserts a psychological dialectic between rational lucidity and emotional chaos in such life-perishing maelstroms: "The essence of this lucidity is a truer perspective of the nature of the universe and his own ordered place in it."[78] Unlike Finholt, who regards the whirlpools as the touchstone of human rationality, the present article argues that the image of "concentric circles" concretizes Poe's posthumanist speculation about the universe. Anthropocentrism has its nutrient soil on the land and gains seemingly irrefutable supremacy there. The narrator then departs from land and ventures into much broader territory, the ocean, to test the efficacy of human centrality. The journey continues and explores more expansive territories, the Earth, the Solar System, and the Milky Way. Even "the Galaxy," the narrator in *Eureka* concludes, "is but one of the clusters which I have been describing [...] as faint hazy spots in various quarters of the sky."[79]

The image of concentric circles epitomizes not only human cognition of the universe but also his position in the universe. Anthropocentrism assumes that human beings occupy the center of all circles. Human beings are proud of their intelligence in exploring the neighboring circles of unknown territories, yet the enlightenment which comes from knowledge, as posthumanists would point out, also illuminates the infinite circles of darkness continuously expanding in the vast universe as well as human ignorance about the immense cosmos. The more information men gain about the universe, the more clearly they will come to realize their humble position in the cosmos.[80]

In short, "The Imp of the Perverse" challenges the anthropocentric standard of reason and compels us to discover the underlying world that brings situations into existence in the here-and-now and legitimizes perverse phenomena. The examples of the perverse in the eponymous

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75 Poe, "MS," 146.

76 Benjamin Franklin Fisher, "Poe and the Gothic Tradition" in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004):72–91, 80–81.

77 Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Work of Edgar Allan Poe*, trans. John Rodker (London: Imago, 1949), 29.

78 Richard D. Finholt, "The Vision at the Brink of the Abyss." *The Georgia Review* 27, no. 3 (1973): 356–366.

79 Edgar Allan Poe, "Eureka" in *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Eureka*. April 18, 2010. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/32037/32037–h/32037–h.htm.

80 Yanyan Zhu and Quan Wang associate Poe's image of concentric circles with Symmes's theory of concentric spheres and argue for the paradoxical roles of science in expanding the human horizon ("Shipwreck Discovery" 135). The present article, however, accentuates posthumanist endeavors to decenter anthropocentrism.

story are orchestrated in an organic manner to illuminate the progression from anthropocentrism to posthumanism. Circumlocution manifests the human longing to build up interpersonal bonds with those of the same species; procrastination evinces the layered temporality beneath the façade of linearity; abyss obsession capitulates an unconscious desire to launch an aerial journey into another space. These three instances outline – species, time, and space – three fundamental coordinates of human identity. The fourth occurrence synthesizes these coordinates and foregrounds the less developed aspects. Nevertheless, the abrupt ending — "*but where*?" — plunges everything into suspension. "MS. Found in a Bottle" continues the suspended journey. The shipwrecks undermine the anthropocentric ground of the "clock-regulated world" formerly known to the survivors now adrift in the enraged ocean. After five days of drifting, the survivors are shrouded in eternal darkness and lose their sense of time. With the diminishment of human agency, time recedes from its manifest aspect of linearity and reveals its shadow dimension of perpetual darkness. In addition to temporality, space also unveils its invisible dimensions. The coexistence of several worlds on the mysterious ship shatters anthropocentric illusions, since different species each have distinctive organs to perceive the world in ways excluding other classes. The final image of "concentric circles" in dark space illuminates the humble position of human beings in the forever-expanding universe. If "The Imp of the Perverse" focuses on the critique of anthropocentrism, then "MS. Found in a Bottle" concentrates on the underlying world beneath the façade of anthropocentrism; together the stories complement each other to outline Poe's posthumanist speculation about anthropocentrism within the infinite cosmos.

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